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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A NAND flash memory bank having a plurality of bitlines of a memory array connected to a page buffer, where NAND cell strings connected to the same bitline are formed in at least two well sectors. At least one well sector can be selectively coupled to an erase voltage during an erase operation, such that unselected well sectors are inhibited from receiving the erase voltage. When the area of the well sectors decrease, a corresponding decrease in the capacitance of each well sector results. Accordingly, higher speed erasing of the NAND flash memory cells relative to a single well memory bank is obtained when the charge pump circuit drive capacity remains unchanged. Alternately, a constant erase speed corresponding to a single well memory bank is obtained by matching a well segment having a specific area to a charge pump with reduced drive capacity. A reduced drive capacity charge pump will occupy less semiconductor chip area, thereby reducing cost.

20 Claims, 17 Drawing Sheets

The block diagram illustrates the internal components of the column decoder circuit. It includes a Column Buffer, Column Decoder, Data Register (labeled 6), Sense amp (labeled 8), and Memory cell Array (labeled 7). The circuit is powered by VDD and VSS. A Row add decoder (labeled 9a) and its buffer (labeled 9b) are connected to the array. An HV generator provides input to the sense amp and the memory cell array.

See application file for complete search history.

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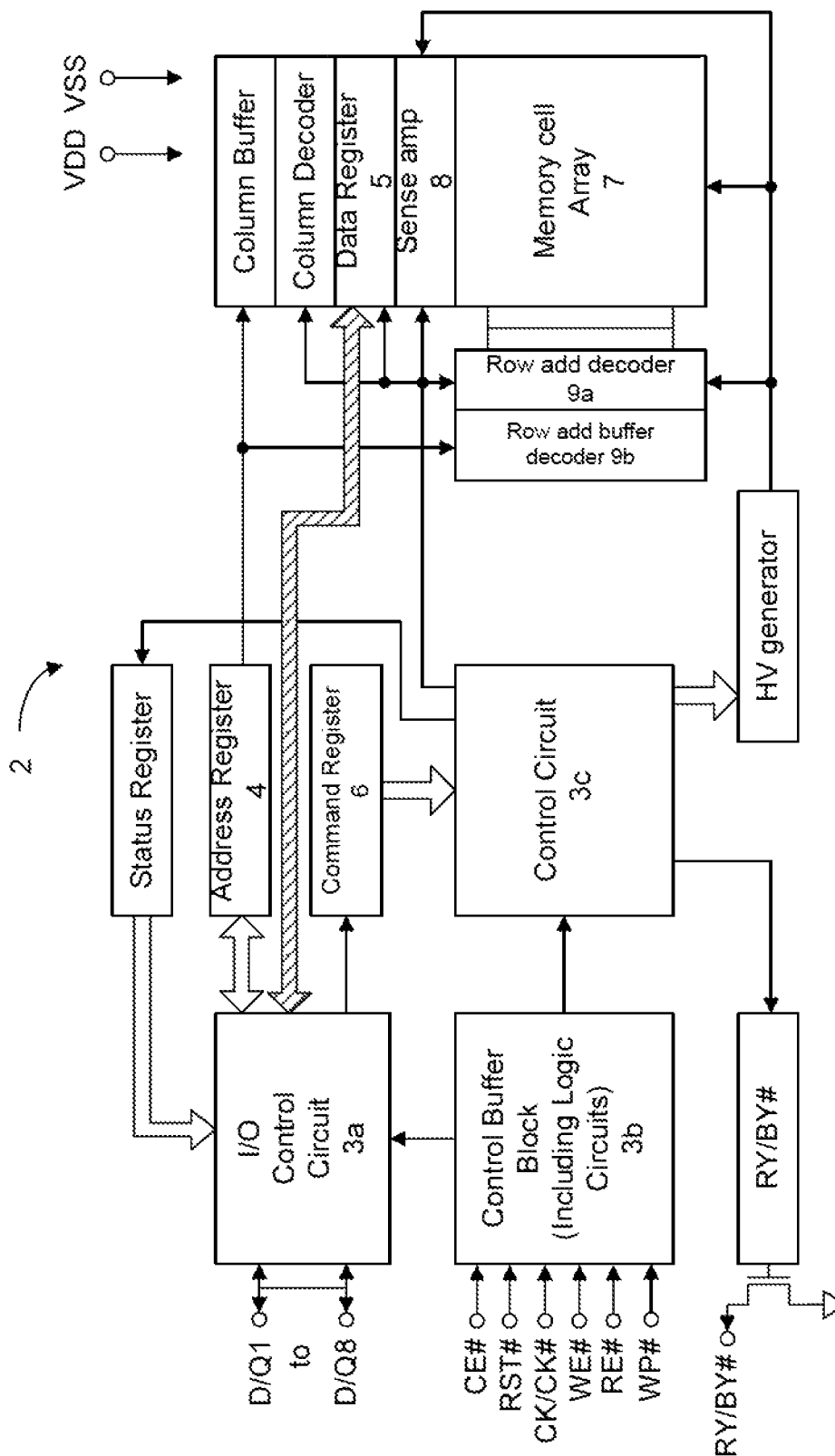


FIG. 1A

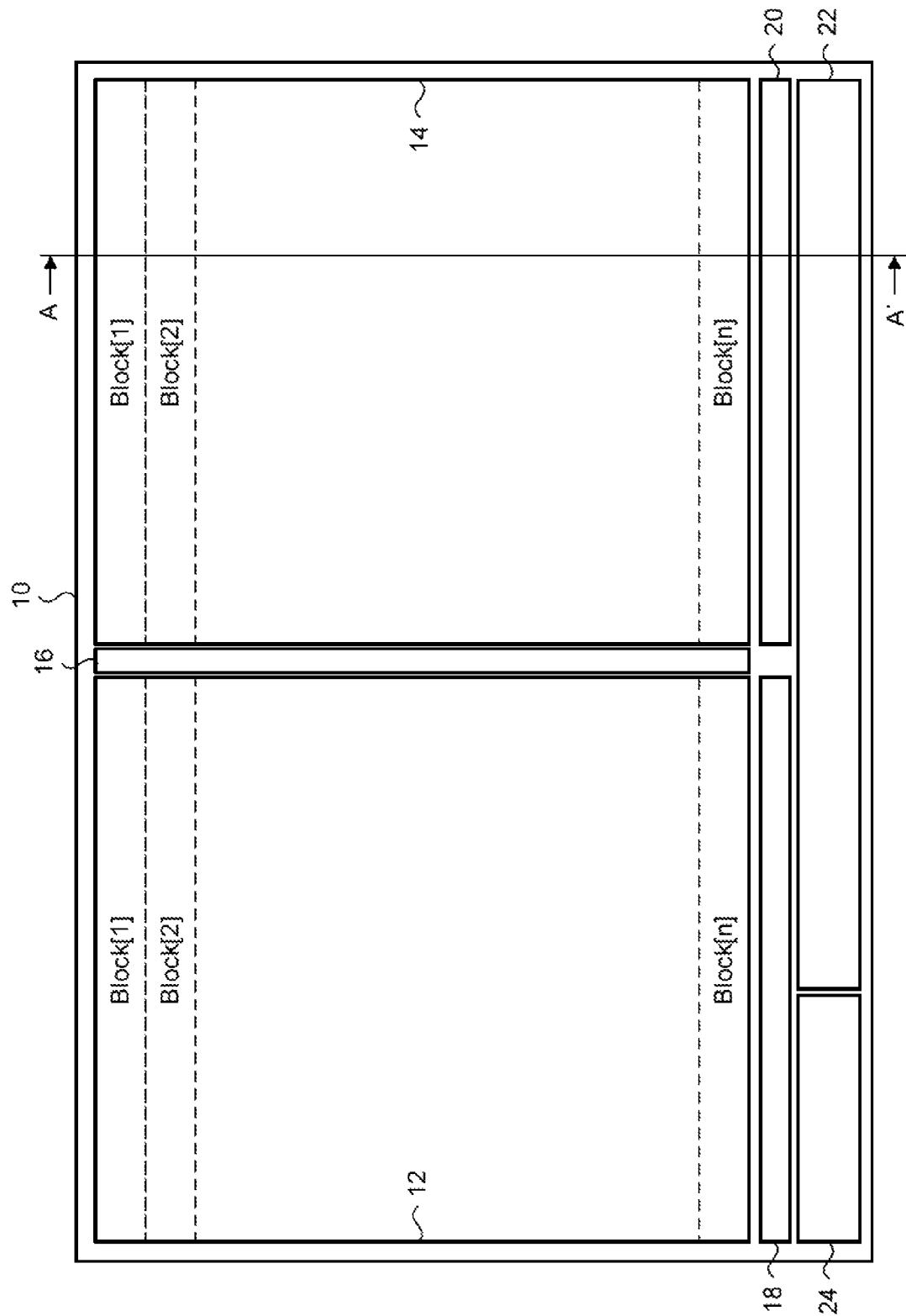


FIG. 1B

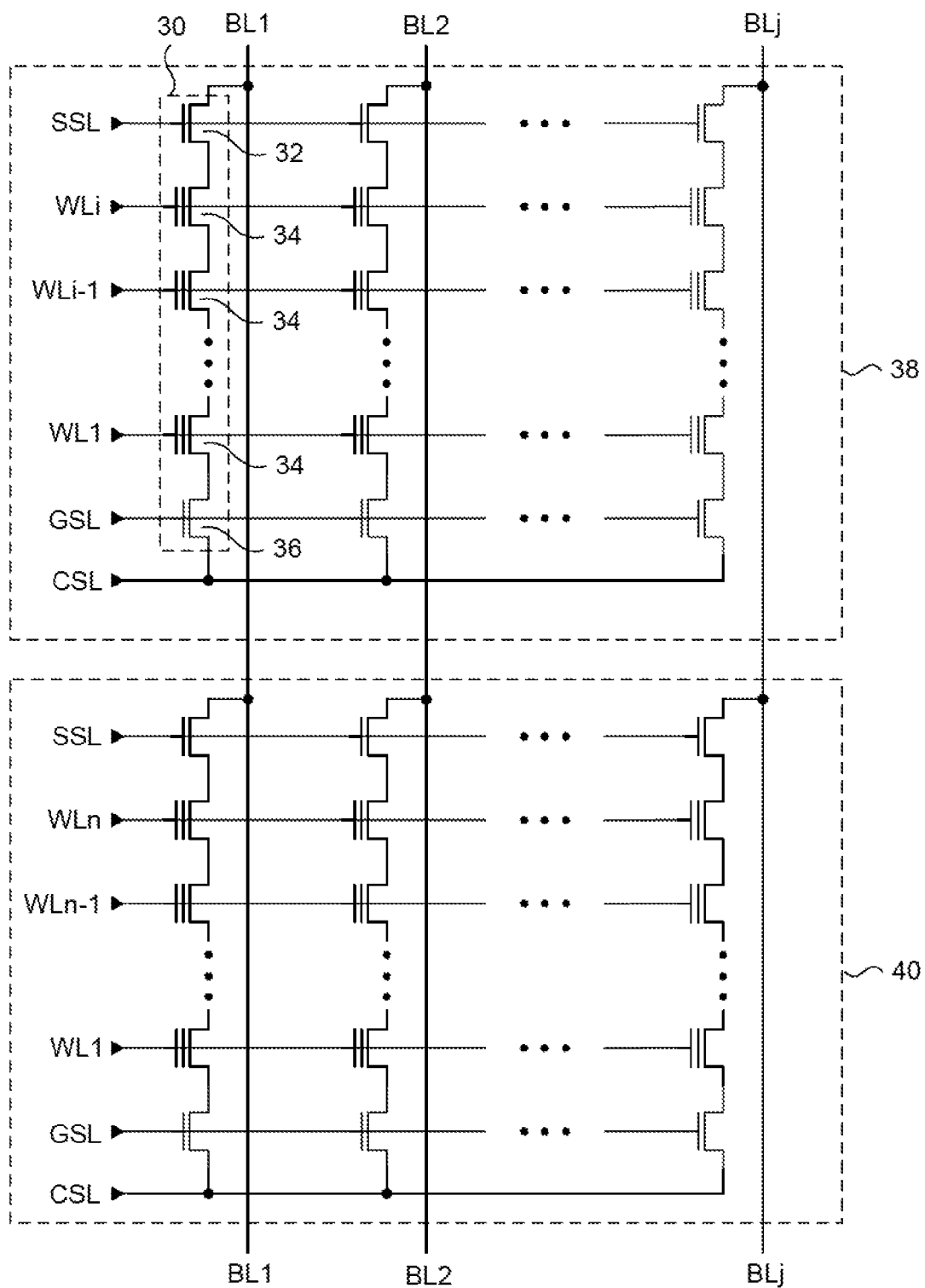


FIG. 2

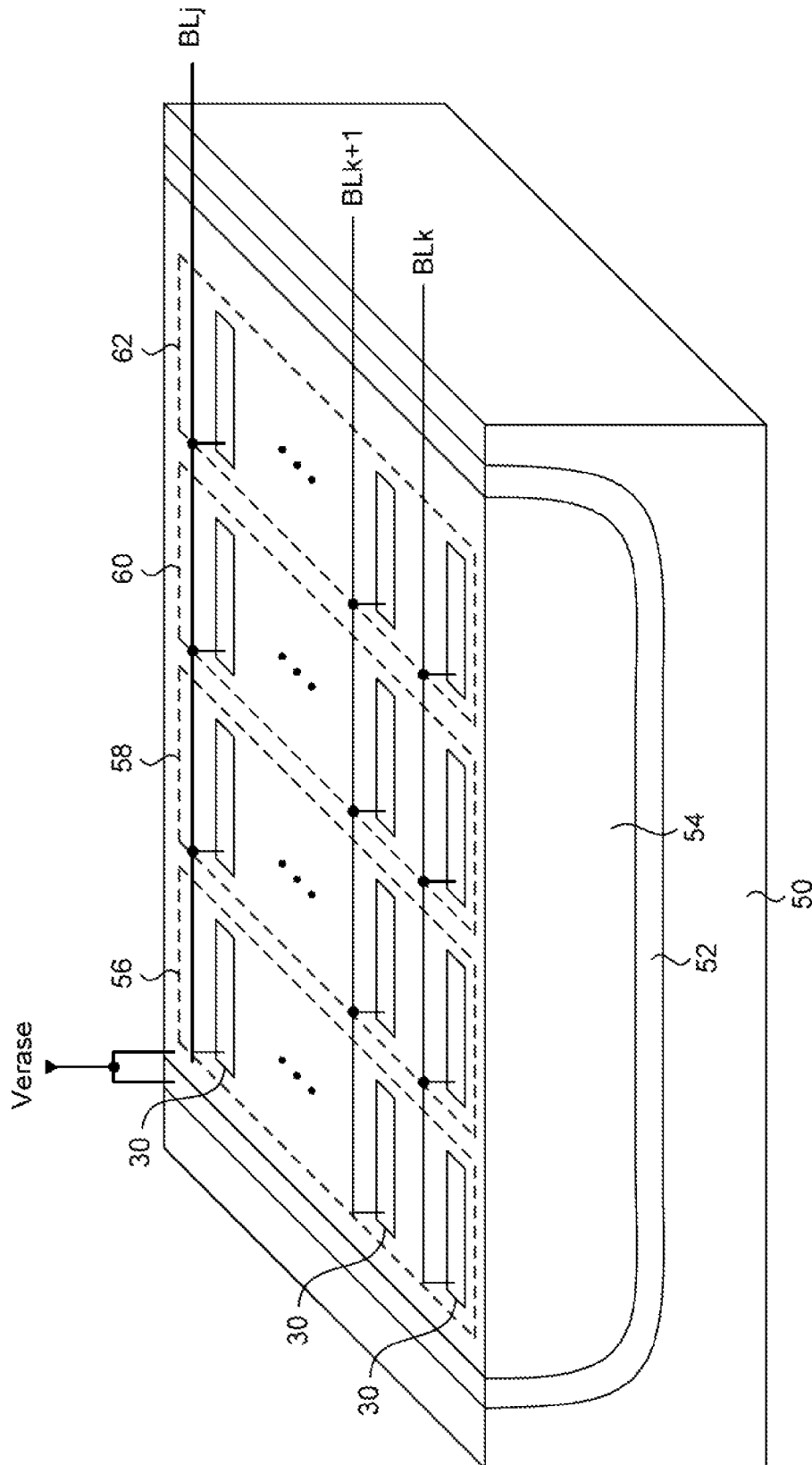


FIG. 3

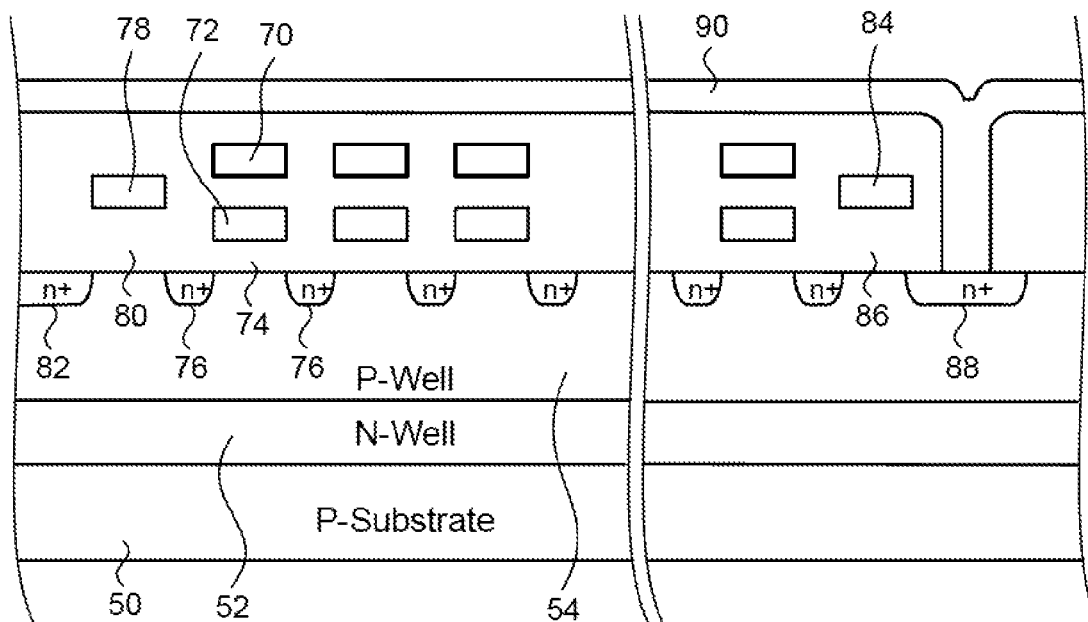


FIG. 4

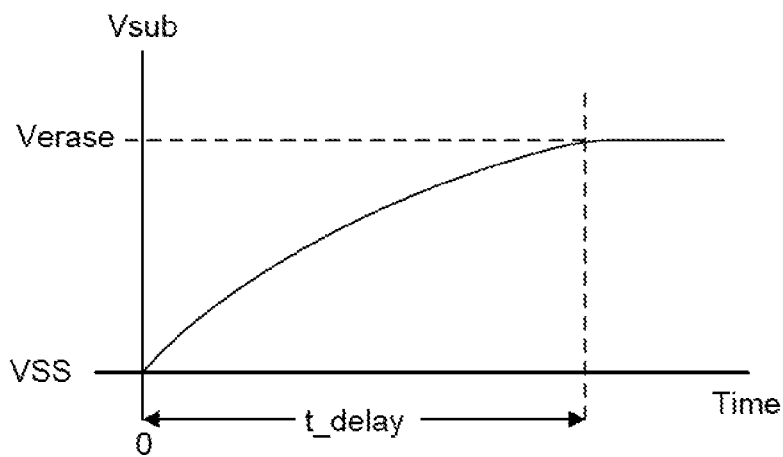


FIG. 5

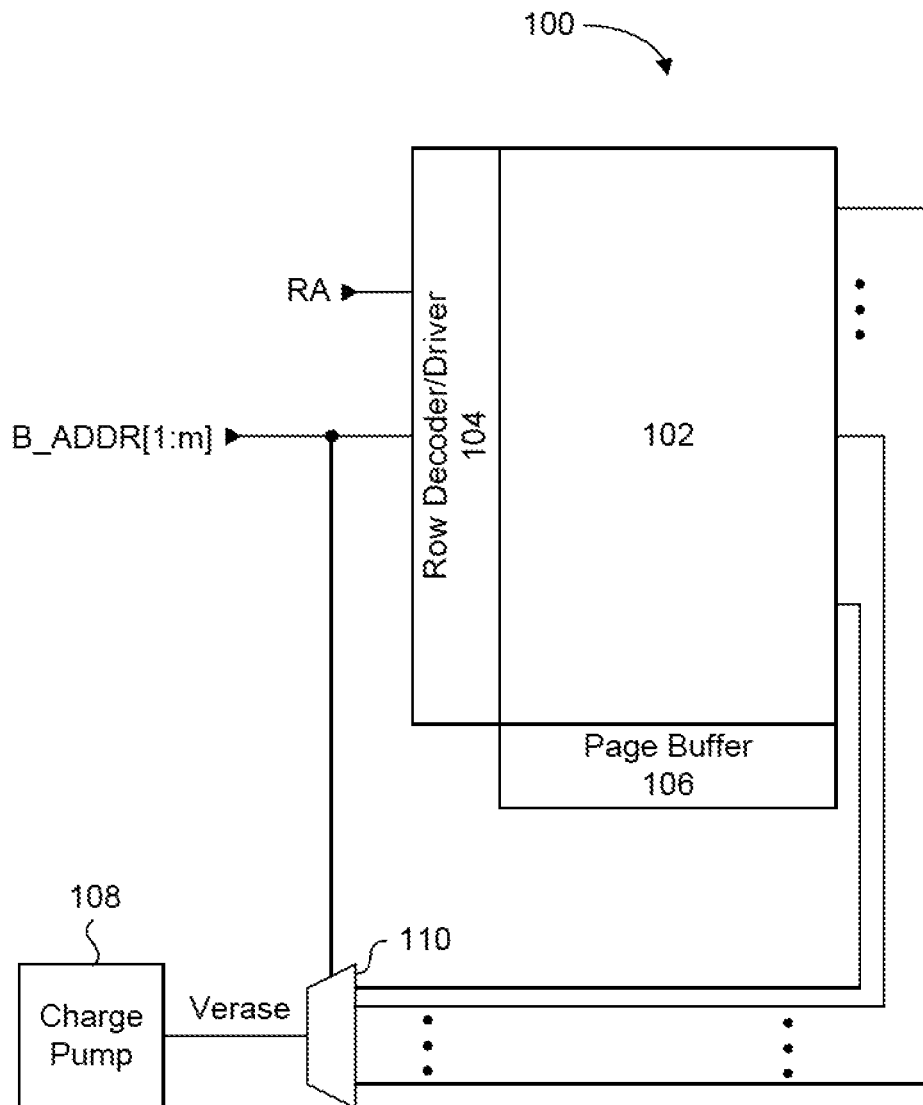


FIG. 6

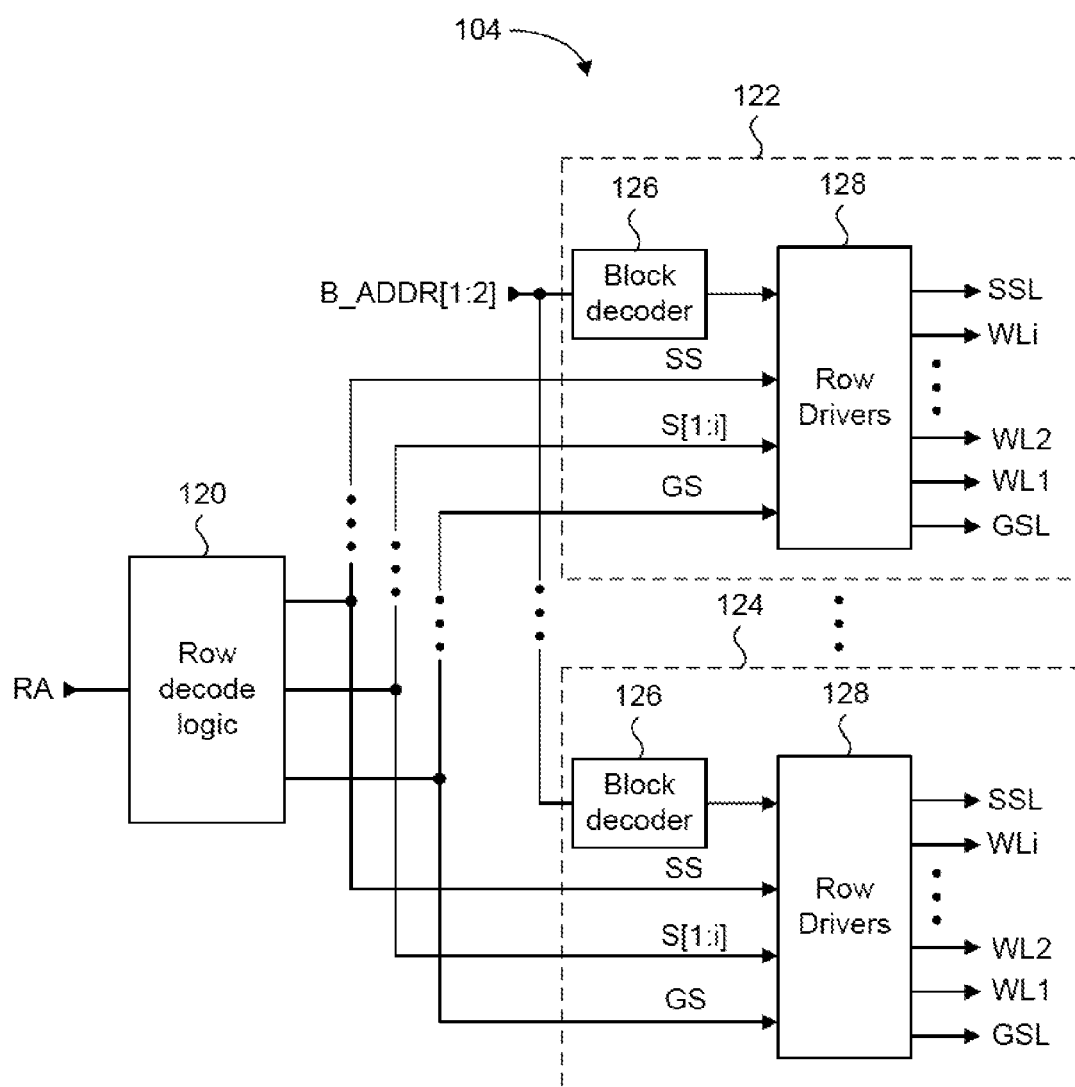


FIG. 7A

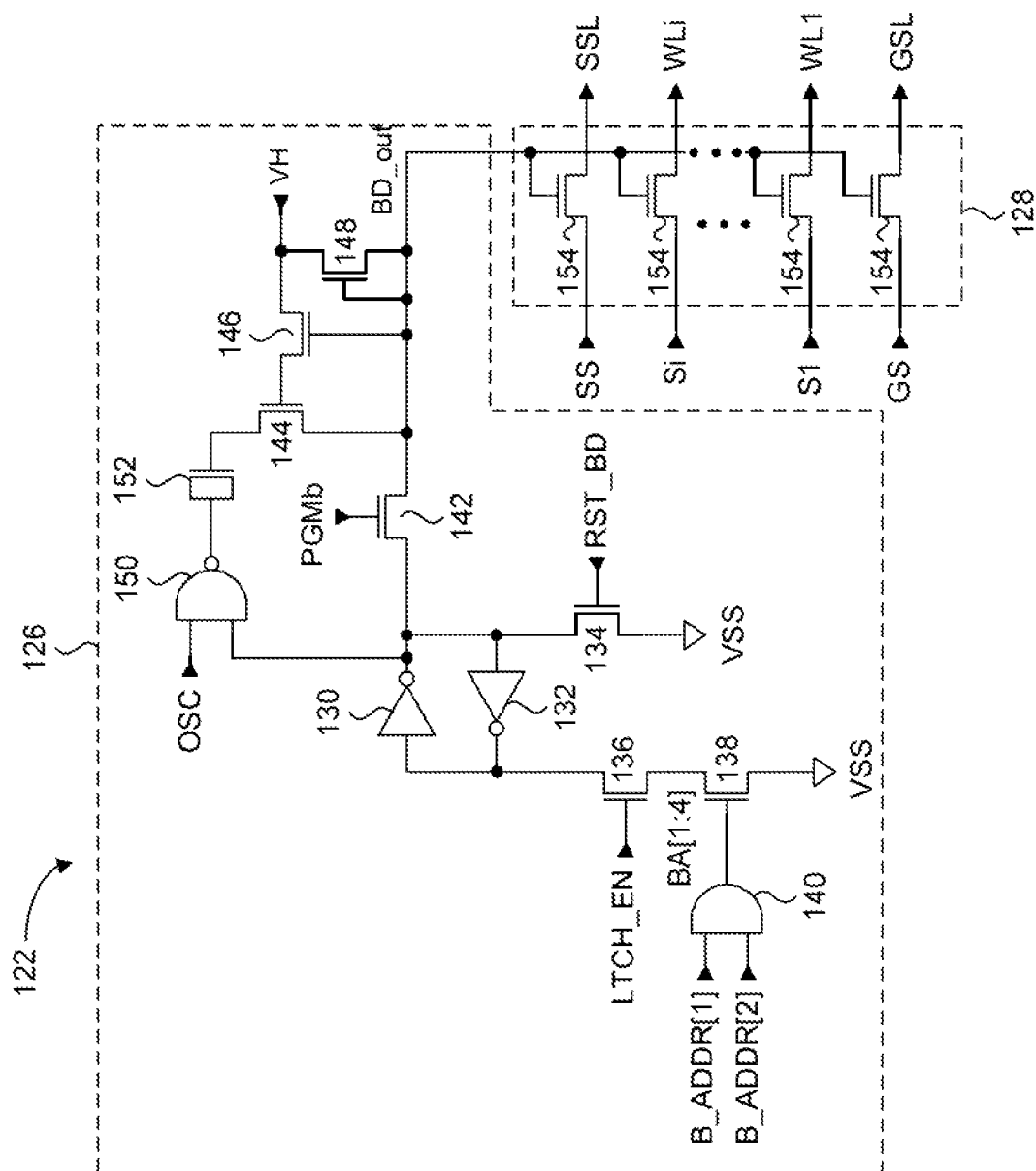


FIG. 7B

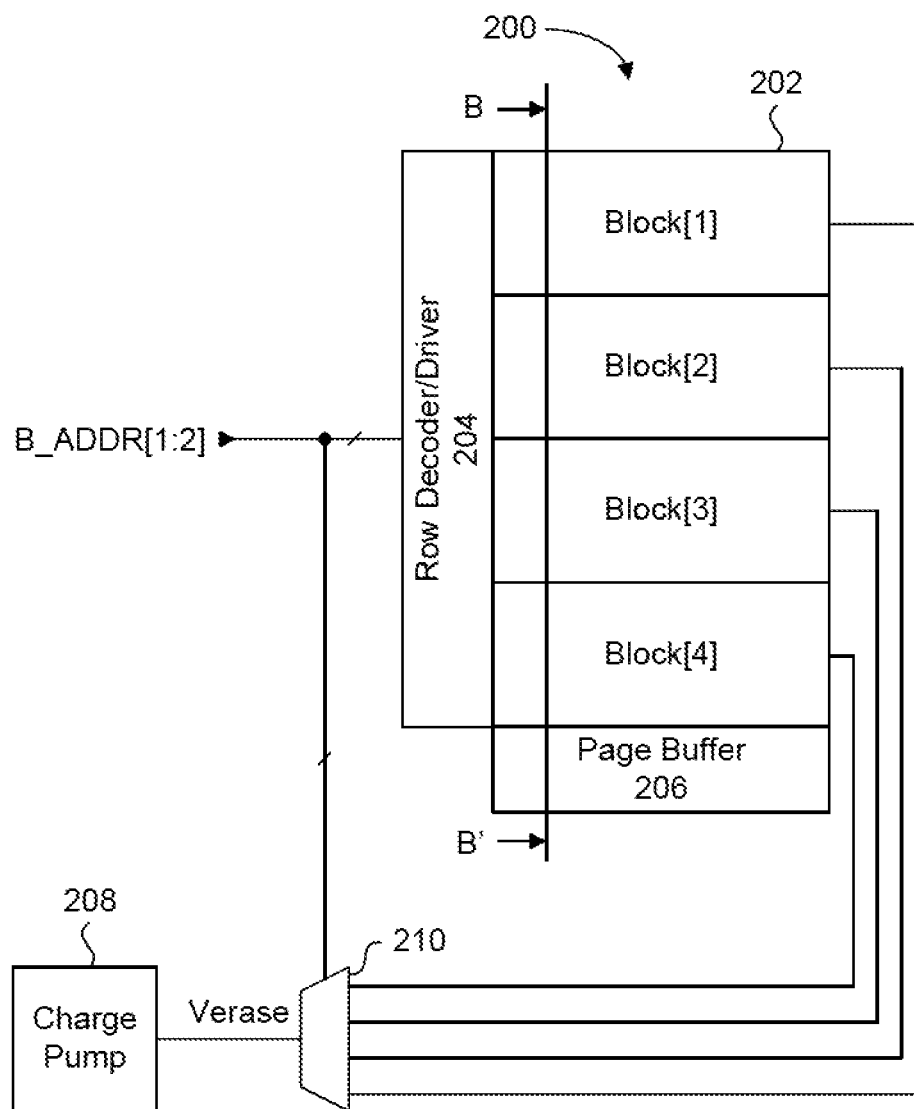


FIG. 8A

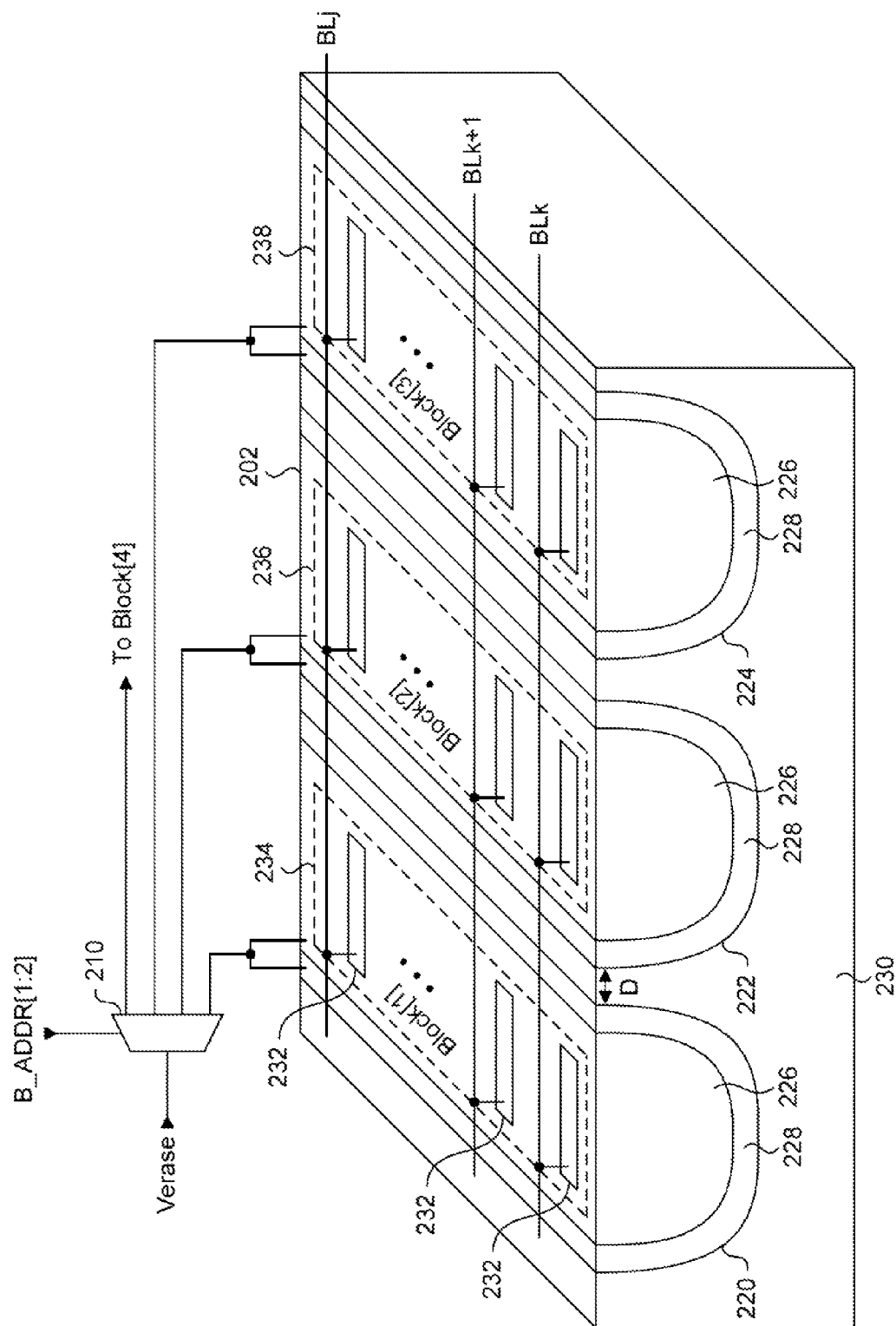


FIG. 8B

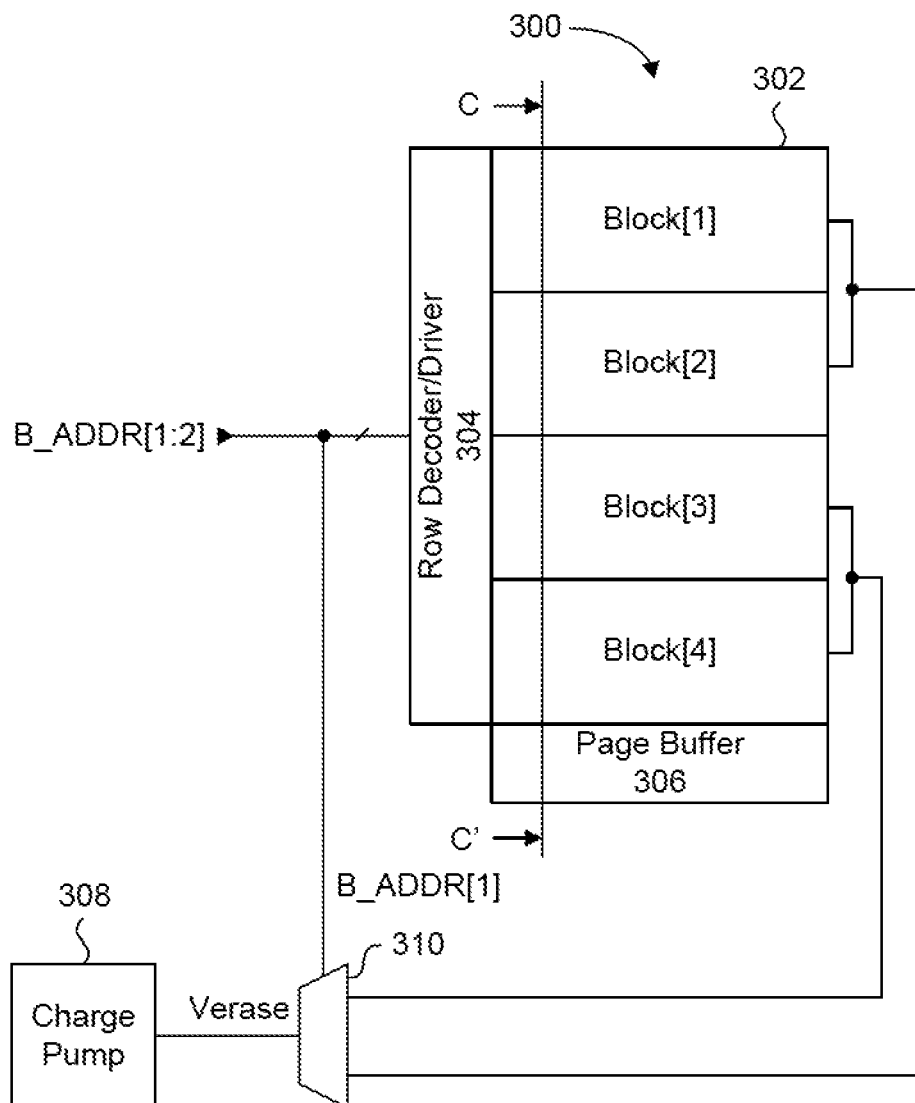


FIG. 9A

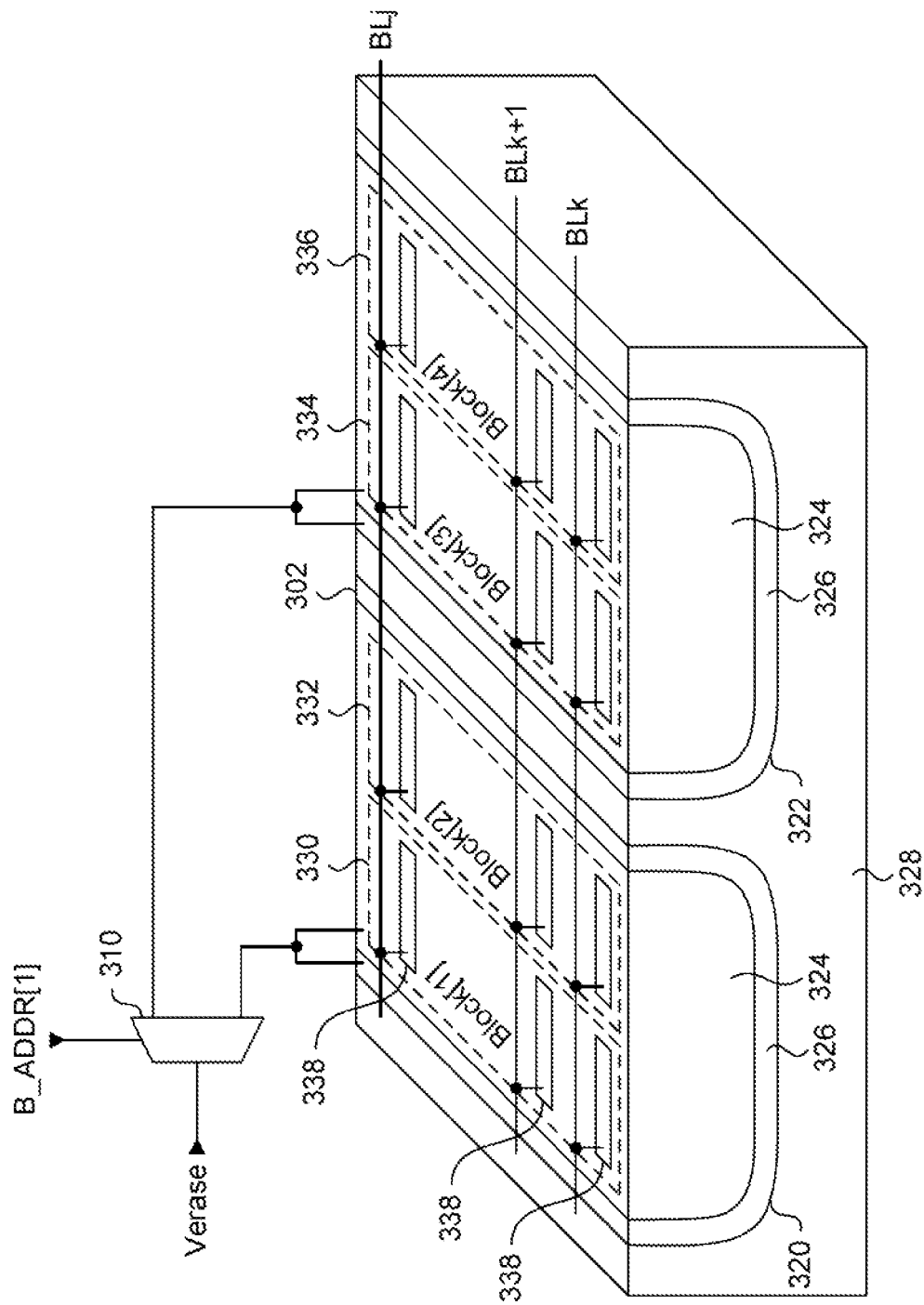


FIG. 9B

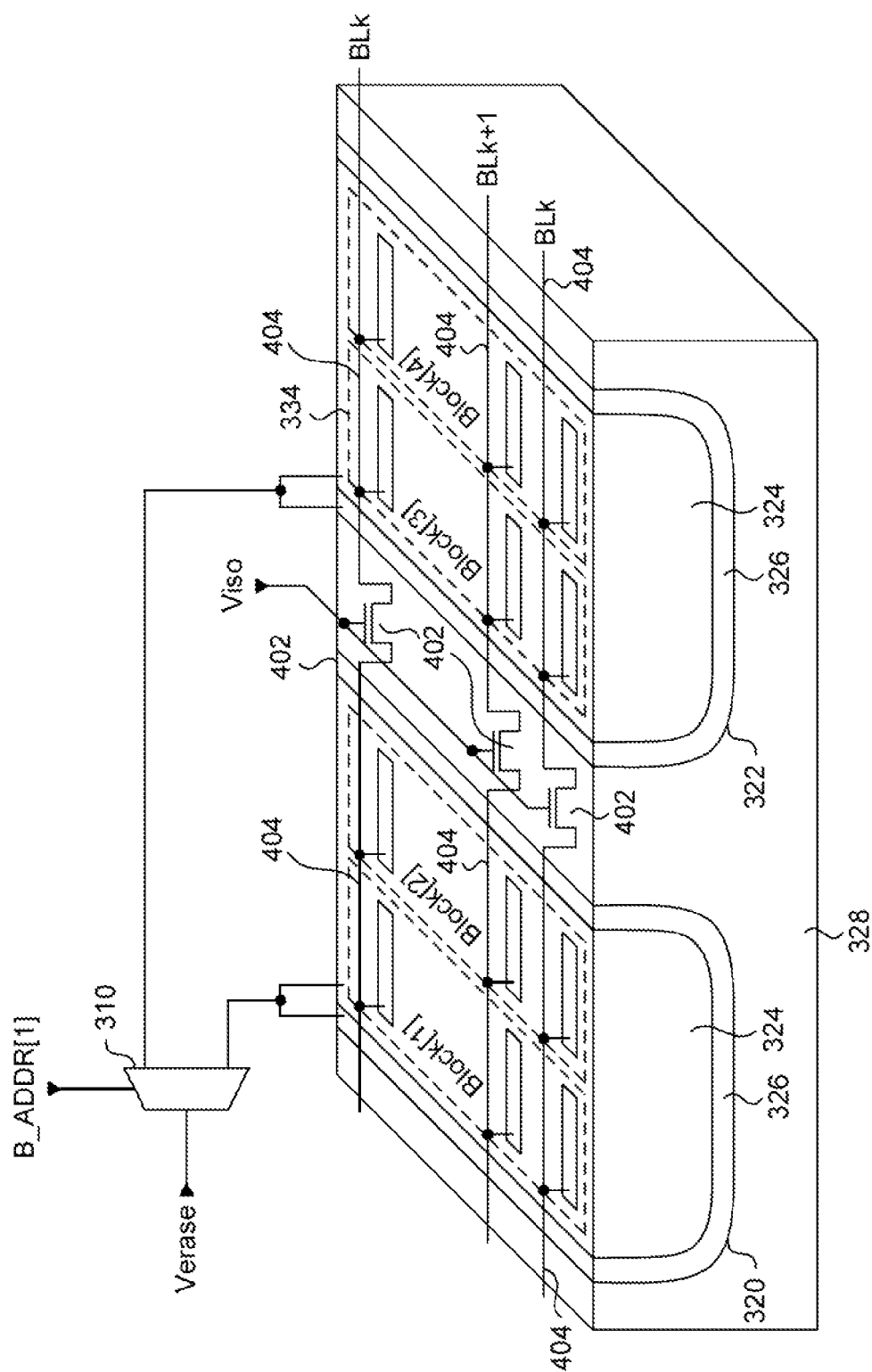


FIG. 10

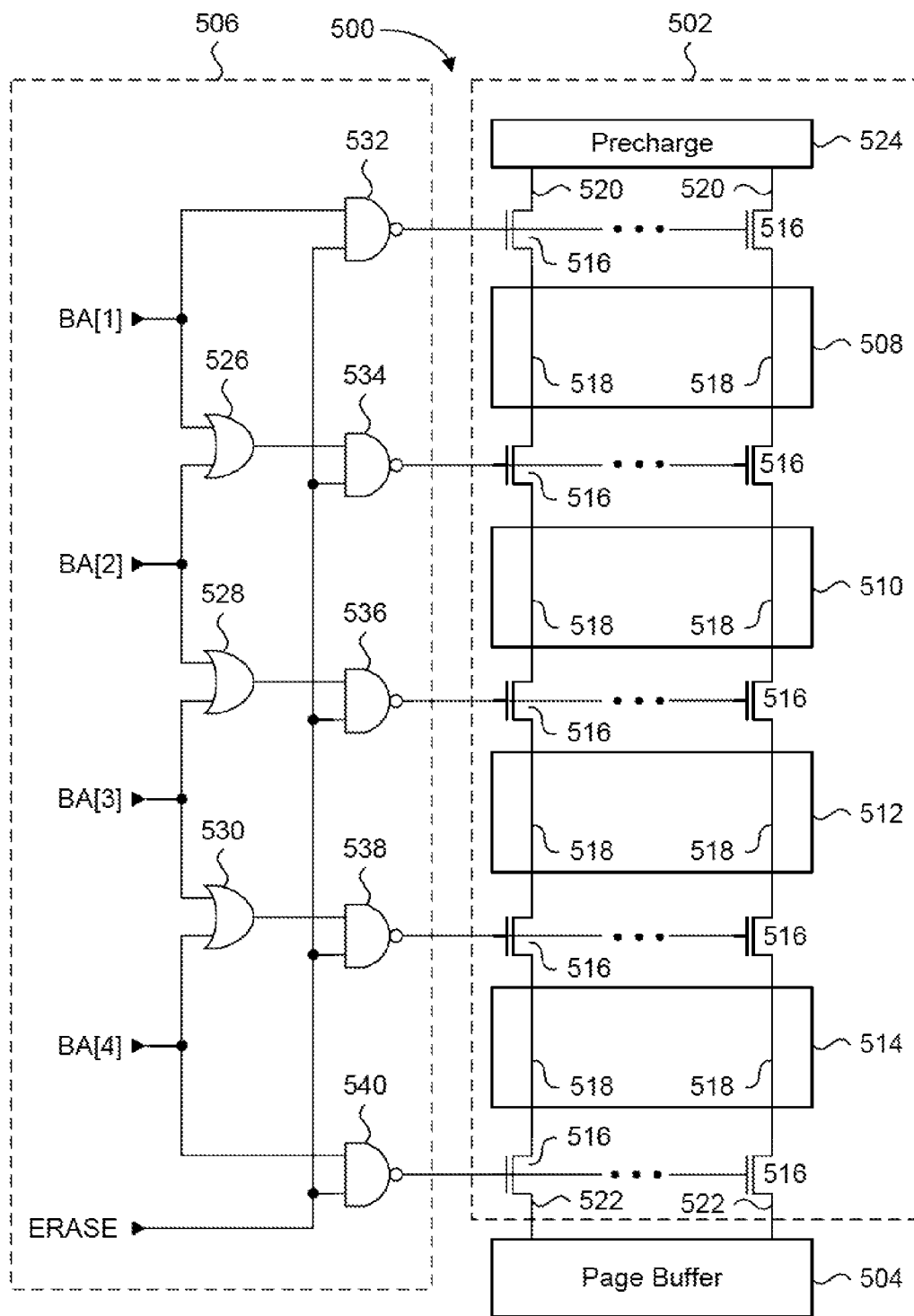


FIG. 11

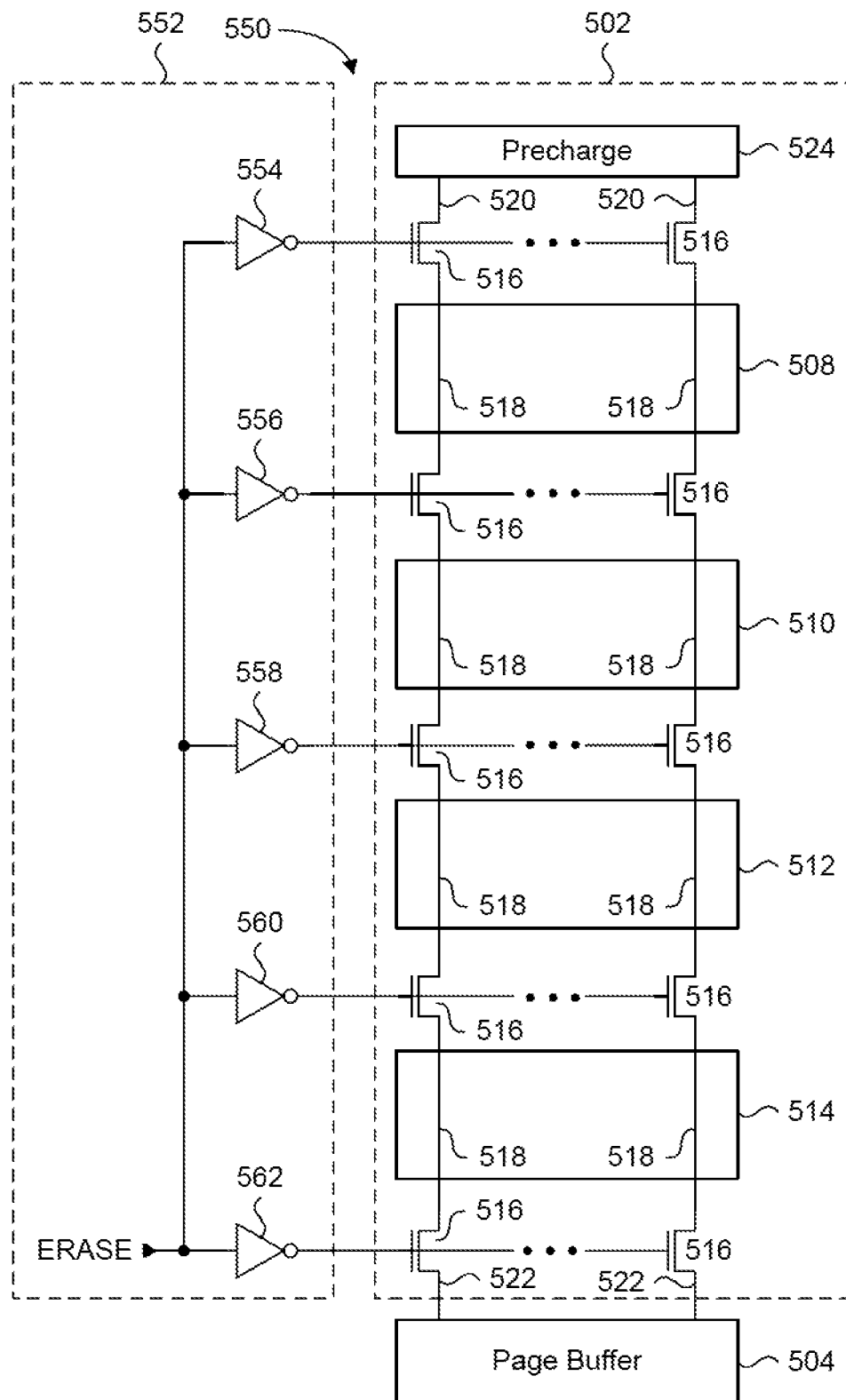


FIG. 12

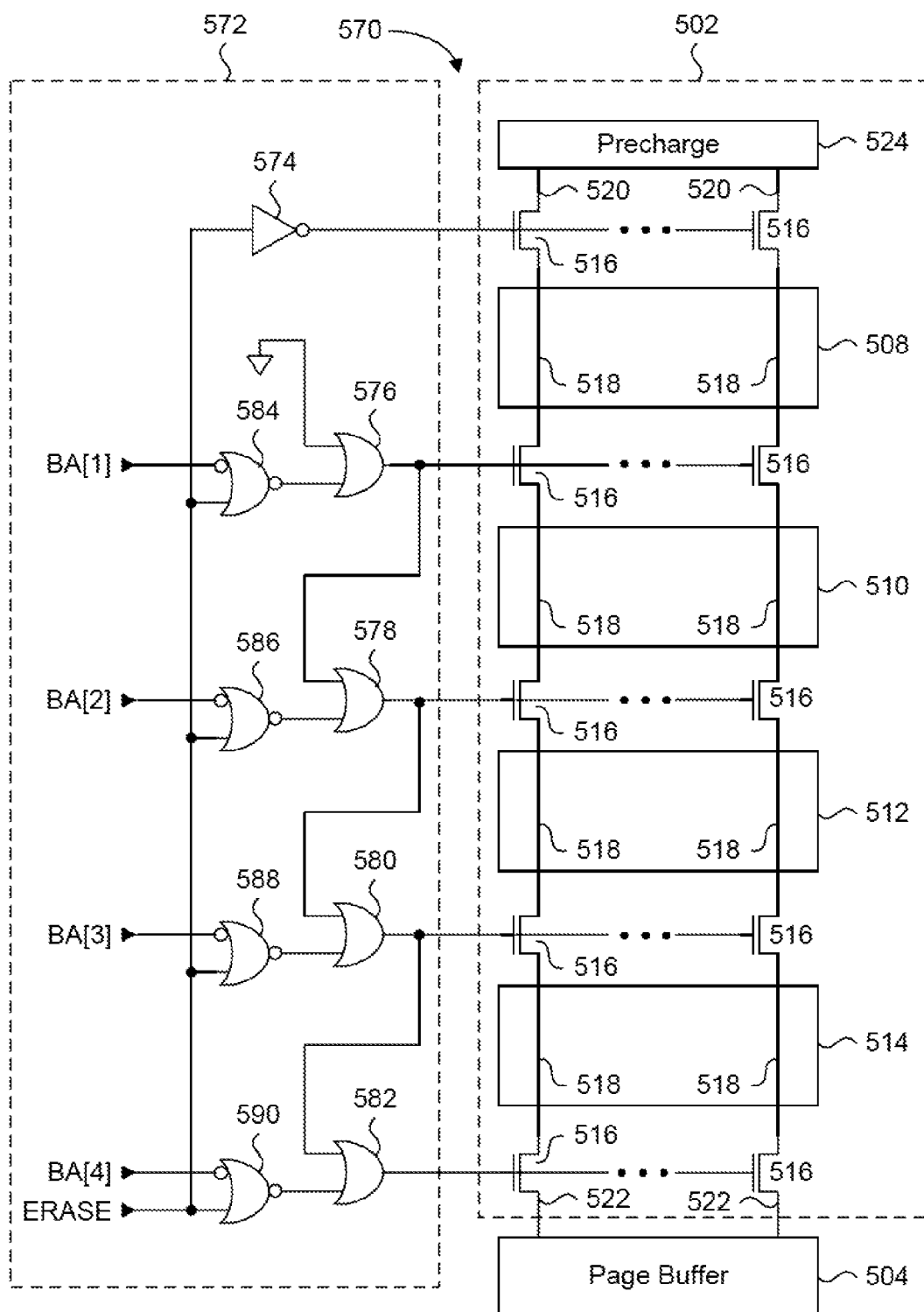


FIG. 13

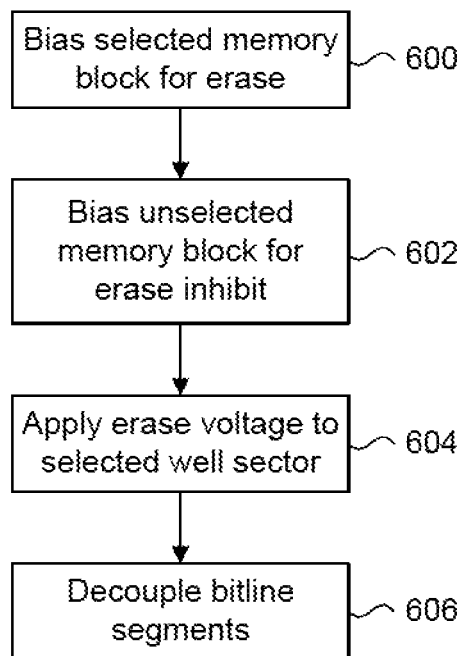


FIG. 14

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NAND FLASH MEMORY HAVING MULTIPLE CELL SUBSTRATES

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application is a continuation of U.S. application Ser. No. 13/073,150, filed on Mar. 28, 2011, which is a continuation of U.S. application Ser. No. 12/143,285, filed on Jun. 20, 2008, now issued as U.S. Pat. No. 7,940,572 on May 10, 2011, which claims the benefit of priority of U.S. Provisional Patent Application No. 61/019,415 filed on Jan. 7, 2008, which are hereby incorporated by reference.

TECHNICAL FIELD

The present invention relates generally to NAND flash memory. More particularly, the present invention relates to erasing NAND flash memory cells.

BACKGROUND

Flash memory is a commonly used type of non-volatile memory in widespread use as storage for consumer electronics and mass storage applications. Flash memory is pervasive in popular consumer products such as digital audio/video players, cell phones and digital cameras, for storing application data and/or media data. Flash memory can further be used as a dedicated storage device, such as a portable flash drive pluggable into a universal serial port (USB) of a personal computer, and a magnetic hard disk drive (HDD) replacement for example. It is well known that flash memory is non-volatile, meaning that it retains stored data in the absence of power, which provides a power savings advantage for the above mentioned consumer products. Flash memory is suited for such applications due to its relatively high density for a given area of its memory array.

FIG. 1A is a general block diagram of typical flash memory device. Flash memory 2 includes well known input and output buffer circuits, such as input/output (I/O) buffer block 3a and control buffer block 3b for receiving external control and data input signals and providing data output signals. The control buffer block 3b receiving the control signals, such as CE# and WE#, may include other basic logic circuits, for implementing rudimentary functions that may be related to control of the data input and buffers for example. Flash memory 2 includes control circuit 3c, for controlling various high level functions of the flash circuits such as read, program and erase operations for example, an address register 4 for storing address information, a data register 5 for storing program data information, a command register 6 for storing command data information, high voltage circuits for generating the required program and erase voltages, and core memory circuits for accessing the memory array 7. Memory array 7 includes flash memory cells, arranged as NAND cell strings for example. The NAND cell strings of a column are coupled to a bitline, which is connected to a page buffer/sense amplifier circuit 8. Sense amplifier circuit 8 senses read data from a selected page of memory cells and provides program data to a selected page of memory cells. One page of memory cells refers to all the memory cells connected to the same wordline. Driving the wordlines is row drivers/decoders, shown as a row address decoder 9a and row address buffer 9b. There can be one or more stages of decoding, and row address buffer 9b can include block decoding logic.

The control circuit 3c includes a command decoder and logic for executing internal flash operations, such as read,

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program and erase functions. Those skilled in the art will understand that these operations are executed in response to the command data stored in the command register 6, sometimes in combination with the address data and program data stored in the respective address register 4 and data register 5, depending on the operation to be executed. The command data, address data and program data are issued by a memory controller and latched into the corresponding registers by flash memory 2. The functions of the shown circuit blocks of flash memory 2 are well known in the art. Persons skilled in the art will understand that flash memory 2 shown in FIG. 1A represents one possible flash memory configuration amongst many possible configurations. In FIG. 1A, memory array 7, sense amplifier circuit 8, data register 5, row address decoder 9a and row address buffer 9b are part of one memory bank.

FIG. 1B is a floor plan layout of a prior art flash memory device to show the area occupied by various circuit blocks. Typically, all the circuit blocks shown in FIG. 1A are formed in the floor plan layout of FIG. 1B. In FIG. 1B, flash memory chip 10 is a semiconductor material rectangular in shape, upon which are formed transistor circuits and structures. Occupying a large proportion of the area are two memory arrays or memory tiles, 12 and 14, which generally correspond to memory array 7 of FIG. 1A. While the present example flash memory 10 includes two memory arrays, alternative designs can include a single memory array or more than two memory arrays. Located between memory arrays 12 and 14 are row decoders 16 that drive wordlines to the required voltage level for read, program and erase operations. Row decoders 16 generally correspond to row address decoder 9a and row address buffer 9b of FIG. 1A. In the example of FIG. 1B, wordlines (not shown) extend in a horizontal direction. Located below each of memory arrays 12 and 14 are page buffers 18 and 20, each being electrically connected to bitlines (not shown) for providing program data and for sensing read data. Page buffers 18 and 20 generally correspond to data register 5 and sense amplifier 8 of FIG. 1A. The combination of memory array 12, row decoders 16 and page buffer 18 is referred to as a memory bank or plane. Similarly, the combination of memory array 14, row decoders 16 and page buffer 20 is referred to as another memory bank or plane. The page buffers 18 and 20 receive and provide data via data lines (not shown), which are coupled to the input and output (I/O) circuits in logic block 22. Logic block 22 further includes other circuits such as a command decoder and registers. Another large area is dedicated for a charge pump 24, which is responsible for generating high voltages required for programming and erasing data stored in the flash memory cells of the first memory array 12 and the second memory array 14. Charge pump 24 generally corresponds to the high voltage generator of FIG. 1A. The elements of flash memory chip 10 have been generically described, but persons skilled in the art will understand that each of the outlined blocks of FIG. 1B will include all the circuits necessary to achieve proper operation of flash memory chip 10.

In the presently shown example of FIG. 1B, the flash memory chip 10 is designed to have NAND flash memory cells arranged in NAND cell strings within memory arrays 12 and 14. The NAND cell strings are organized into memory blocks, such as Block[1] to Block[n], where n can be any non-zero integer value. The selection of the number of blocks in each array is a design parameter of flash memory chip 10.

FIG. 2 depicts an example memory array of flash memory chip 10 of FIG. 1B. The example illustrated in FIG. 2 has two memory blocks in one memory array. In FIG. 2, one NAND cell string is outlined with a dashed box 30, which includes a string select device 32, flash memory cells 34, and a source-

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line select device **36** connected in series between bitline BL1 and common source line CSL. There can be "i" flash memory cells **34** per NAND cell string, where i is a non-zero integer value. Accordingly, wordlines WL1 to WL_i are electrically coupled to corresponding gates of the flash memory cells **34**. A string select line (SSL) and a source select line (GSL) are electrically coupled to select devices **32** and **36** respectively. In the present example, all the transistors of the NAND cell string **30** are n-channel devices.

A memory block **38**, being the same as memory Block[1] of FIG. 1B for example, will include all the NAND cell strings having select devices and flash memory cells connected to the same wordlines, string select line and source select line. The width of memory block **38** is set by the number of bitlines, which in the case of FIG. 2 is "j" bitlines where j is a non-zero integer value. Memory block **40** includes further NAND cell strings connected to bitlines BL1 to BL_j. A bitline and the NAND cell strings electrically connected to it is referred to as a column.

All the circuits of flash memory chip **10** of FIG. 1B, including the NAND cell strings shown in FIG. 2 are formed by using well-known semiconductor manufacturing processes. In such processes, transistors of the same type are grouped together and formed in their own well. For example, n-type transistors are formed in a p-type well and p-type transistors are formed in an n-type well. In some cases, only a single well is used, where its type depends on the type of the substrate. In most NAND flash memory devices, all the NAND cell strings in a memory array are formed in one well, which results in disadvantages that are described later on.

FIG. 3 is a cross-sectional diagram of memory array **14** taken along line A-A' of FIG. 1B, and angled to show specific features on its surface. The cross-sectional structure of the semiconductor substrate where page buffer **20** and logic block **22** are formed is not shown. In FIG. 3, the substrate **50** is a p-type substrate having an n-well **52** and a p-well **54**. P-well **54** is formed within n-well **52** such that p-well **54** is spaced from substrate **50**. All the NAND cell strings **30** of FIG. 2, and more specifically the transistor devices of NAND cell strings **30**, are formed within p-well **54**. The well structure shown in FIG. 3 is commonly known as a triple-well structure, or a triple pocket structure. On the surface of p-well **54** are the NAND cell strings **30**, simply represented as trapezoid boxes, where each NAND cell string of a column is connected in parallel to a bitline, such as bitline BL_k where "k" is a variable representing a logical bitline position less than BL_j. With reference to FIG. 2, the bitline is connected to the string select device **32** of each NAND cell string **30**. Accordingly, the NAND cell strings that share common select lines and wordlines are part of one memory block. FIG. 3 illustrates four memory blocks **56**, **58**, **60** and **62** to simply the drawing, however those skilled in the art will understand that there can be any number of memory blocks in memory arrays **12** and **14**. Both the n-well **52** and the p-well **54** receives an erase voltage Verase during erase operations, and are both biased to 0V or VSS during all other operations such as program and read for example. Verase can be coupled to n-well **52** and p-well **54** at multiple different locations.

FIG. 4 is a cross section diagram of a NAND cell string **30** of FIG. 3, having the equivalent circuit diagram shown in FIG. 2. Each flash memory cell includes a polysilicon wordline **70** and a polysilicon floating gate **72**, where the floating gate **72** is formed over a thin gate oxide **74**. On either side of thin gate oxide **74** and formed within p-type well **54** are n-type diffusion regions **76**. The sourceline select device **36** includes a polysilicon gate **78** formed over a thick gate oxide **80**, and an n-type diffusion region **82** acting as the common

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source line CSL. Diffusion region **82** is shared with all the NAND cell strings in the memory block, as illustrated in FIG. 2. The string select device **32** includes a polysilicon gate **84** formed over a thick gate oxide **86**, and an n-type diffusion region **88** that is electrically connected to a bitline **90**.

As is well known in the art, NAND flash memory devices are block erasable, meaning that individual memory blocks can be selectively erased through Fowler-Nordheim (F-N) tunneling, based on a block address or other selection signal. In order to erase a memory block such as memory block **38** of FIG. 2, the wordlines of the selected memory block are biased to 0V, SSL and GSL are floated, and both the n-well **52** and the p-well **54** are biased to Verase. Verase is a high voltage generated by the charge pump **24** of FIG. 1B, and in example flash memory devices is about 20V. Because SSL and GSL are floated during the erase operation, both SSL and GSL are self-boosted when Verase is applied to n-well **52** and p-well **54** due to the capacitive coupling between the wells and SSL and GSL. Depending on the capacitive coupling ratio, GSL and SSL can be boosted to approximately 80% to 90% of Verase. CSL and all bitlines are floated during the erase operation, and eventually self-boost to about Verase-0.6V. Those skilled in the art will understand that the forward bias p-n junction voltage drop across p-well **54** to the n-type diffusion regions **82** and **88**. Under these erase bias conditions, trapped electrons (charge) in the floating gate of the flash memory cells are emitted uniformly to the substrate. The threshold voltage (V_{th}) of the erased flash memory cell becomes negative, meaning that the erased cell will turn on with a gate bias of 0V.

Since the unselected memory blocks reside in the same p-well **54** as the selected memory block, these unselected memory blocks must be inhibited from being erased. A self-boosting erase inhibit scheme described in U.S. Pat. No. 5,473,563 is widely used in NAND flash memory devices to prevent erasure of unselected memory blocks. To prevent erasure of flash memory cells in unselected memory blocks using the self-boosting erase inhibit scheme, all wordlines in unselected memory blocks are floated. Therefore floated wordlines in the unselected memory blocks are boosted to about 90% of Verase when the p-well **54** rises to Verase, by capacitive coupling between the p-well **54** and the wordlines. It should be understood that the final boosted voltage level on the floating wordlines is determined by the coupling ratio between the substrate and wordlines. The boosted voltage of the wordlines in the unselected memory blocks is effective for reducing the electric field between the p-well **54** and the wordlines, thereby minimizing unintended erasure of data stored therein.

Once the erase operation ends, Verase is set to VSS for a block erase verify operation for determining if all the flash memory cells of the selected memory block have been successfully erased. If not, then a subsequent erase operation is executed upon the selected memory block. Verase is also set to VSS during read and program operations, or alternately, a different circuit couples VSS to n-well **52** and p-well **54**. For example, n-channel transistor devices can be used to couple n-well **52** and p-well **54** in response to a control signal that is activated during read or program operations. Logic for executing such an operation would be well known to those skilled in the art. A problem with the prior art NAND flash memory is the amount of time required to drive n-well **52** and p-well **54** from VSS to Verase, which directly affects the total erase time. It is apparent from FIG. 1B that the area of one memory bank is large relative to the total area of flash memory chip **10**, and thus the capacitance can be in the range

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of several nF for example. As a result, the rise time of V_{erase} can be between 200 μs to 300 μs , for example.

FIG. 5 is a graph plotting the relationship between the substrate voltage V_{sub} and time. If an erase operation begins at time=0 and V_{erase} is at VSS, then there is a delay of t_{delay} before the substrate voltage reaches V_{erase} . As previously mentioned, this delay can range between 200 μs to 300 μs for some example flash memory devices. A solution to improve erase performance is to increase the size of the charge pump circuit that generates V_{erase} . This typically involves a combination of adding capacitor elements or increasing the size of capacitor elements of the charge pump to increase the rate at which the substrate reaches V_{erase} . A larger charge pump would thus reduce t_{delay} and improve erase performance. Persons skilled in the art understand that capacitor elements used in such charge pumps occupy significant semiconductor area. FIG. 1B clearly shows that charge pump 24 occupies a significant area of flash memory chip 10, especially in comparison with the logic block 22. An example charge pump circuit is shown in U.S. Pat. No. 5,642,309. In view of the tightly packed layout of the example flash memory chip 10 of FIG. 1B, there is insufficient area for increasing the size of charge pump 24. Accordingly, improved erase performance in flash memory chip 10 may not be attained. In some flash memory chip designs, the primary constraint may be to minimize chip size, which directly impacts the cost of the chip. While a minimally sized charge pump will reduce chip area consumption, the drawback is degraded erase performance. Hence there is a trade-off between erase performance and chip area in prior art flash memory chips.

Another problem with the prior art NAND flash memory is the power consumption due to the charging and discharging of the n-well 52 and p-well 54. As previously mentioned, because each of the memory array wells occupy a large proportion of the area of flash memory chip 10 of FIG. 1B, their capacitance can be in the range of several nF for example. This is problematic because after each erase cycle, an erase verify operation is executed to check that the erased memory cells have the erased threshold voltage. An erase verify operation is similar to a normal NAND flash read operation, and therefore the n-well 52 and p-well 54 are biased to VSS. If the verify operation fails, then the erase cycle is repeated and the wells are charged back to V_{erase} . This process may repeat several times, thus consuming power.

A further problem with the prior art NAND flash memory is the exposure of unselected memory blocks to the V_{erase} well voltage when a selected memory block is to be erased. Although the previously described self-boosting erase inhibit scheme can be used to minimize erase disturbance in the cells of the unselected memory blocks, there is still a voltage difference between V_{erase} of the well and the wordlines that are at about 80% to 90% of V_{erase} in the unselected blocks. While the resulting erase disturb may be small for one erase cycle, the cumulative effect will be significant. For example, if it is assumed that the memory array has 2048 memory blocks and the erase time for one memory block is about 2 ms, then erasing all the memory blocks just once will expose each memory block to 2047 \times 2 ms of erase stress. The cumulative erase disturb stress is more significant in multi-level NAND flash cells.

SUMMARY

It is an object of the present invention to obviate or mitigate at least one disadvantage of previous NAND Flash memories.

According to an embodiment of the present invention achieves a NAND flash memory chip having high speed erase

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performance while minimizing charge pump circuit area, power consumption and erase stress for unselected memory blocks.

For example, in accordance with one embodiment, there is provided with a NAND flash memory bank having a plurality of bitlines of a memory array connected to a page buffer, where NAND cell strings connected to the same bitline are formed in at least two well sectors. At least one well sector can be selectively coupled to an erase voltage during an erase operation, such that unselected well sectors are inhibited from receiving the erase voltage. When the area of the well sectors decrease, a corresponding decrease in the capacitance of each well sector results. Accordingly, higher speed erasing of the NAND flash memory cells relative to a single well memory bank is obtained when the charge pump circuit drive capacity remains unchanged. Alternately, a constant erase speed corresponding to the single well memory bank is obtained by matching a well segment having a specific area to a charge pump with reduced drive capacity. A reduced drive capacity charge pump will occupy less semiconductor chip area. Furthermore, because the well sector capacitance is reduced, the amount of power consumed for charging and discharging the well sector during erase operations is also reduced.

In a first aspect, the present invention provides NAND Flash memory. The NAND flash memory includes a first well sector, a second well sector, a bitline and a page buffer. The first well sector has a first NAND cell string for selectively receiving an erase voltage during an erase operation. The second well sector has a second NAND cell string for selectively receiving the erase voltage during the erase operation. The bitline is electrically connected to the first NAND cell string and the second NAND cell string. The page buffer is electrically connected to the bitline. The first well sector can include a third NAND cell string electrically connected to a second bitline, and the second well sector can include a fourth NAND cell string electrically connected to the second bitline, where the second bitline is electrically connected to the page buffer. The first NAND cell string and the third NAND cell string are part of one memory block, and the second NAND cell string and the fourth NAND cell string are part of another memory block.

Alternately, the first well sector can include a third NAND cell string electrically connected to the bitline, and the second well sector can include a fourth NAND cell string electrically connected to the bitline. The first NAND cell string is part of a first memory block, the third NAND cell string is part of a second memory block, the second NAND cell string is part of a third memory block, and the fourth NAND cell string is part of a fourth memory block. The NAND flash memory can further include a block decoder for selecting one of the first memory block, the second memory block, the third memory block and the fourth memory block for erasure, in response to a block address. A charge pump and a selector can be provided, where the charge pump provides an erase voltage and the selector couples the erase voltage to one of the first well sector and the second well sector in response to the block address.

The bitline described in the first aspect can include a first bitline segment electrically connected to the first NAND cell string and a second bitline segment electrically connected to the second NAND cell string through an isolation device, where the isolation device is located between the first well sector and the second well sector. The isolation device can have its gate terminal biased to a voltage greater than a supply voltage V_{DD} during a program operation, a read operation and the erase operation. Alternately, the isolation device can be rendered electrically non-conductive in the erase operation

for isolating the first bitline segment from the second bitline segment when one of the first NAND cell string and the second NAND cell string is selected for erasure. The isolation device can be turned off in response to a control signal or in response to a well sector selection signal. The NAND flash memory can further include a bitline segment decoder for enabling the isolation device in response to a well sector selection signal during a read operation, the bitline segment decoder disabling the isolation device in response to an erase control signal during an erase operation. The bitline segment decoder can include an isolation device driver for receiving the erase control signal and the well sector selection signal, the isolation device driver providing an isolation drive signal for controlling the isolation device when the well sector selection signal is at an active logic level. The isolation device driver can include an override circuit for driving the well sector selection signal to the active logic level in response to another well sector selection signal at the active logic level.

In a second aspect, the present invention provides a NAND Flash memory. The NAND Flash memory includes at least two well sectors each including at least one memory block of NAND cell strings, and isolation devices. The at least one memory block in each of the at least two well sectors is electrically connected to corresponding bitline segments, and the isolation devices are coupled between the bitline segments corresponding to the at least two well sectors. Each of the at least two well sectors can include two memory blocks. The isolation devices can have gate terminals biased to a predetermined voltage which can be greater than a supply voltage VDD. Alternately, the isolation devices are turned off during an erase operation, or are selectively turned off during a read operation. During a read operation the isolation devices between a selected well sector including a selected memory block and a page buffer are turned on. The NAND flash memory further includes a selector for selectively passing an erase voltage to one of the at least two well sectors. The selector couples the erase voltage to one of the at least two well sectors in response to a portion of a block address, the block address being decoded to select one memory block for erasure. The NAND flash memory can further include a page buffer electrically connected to the bitline segments corresponding to one of the at least two well sectors.

In a third aspect, the present invention provides a method for erasing a selected memory block in a NAND Flash device. The method includes selecting a memory block in a first well sector, the first well sector including at least two memory blocks; biasing the memory block formed in the first well sector for erasure; biasing an unselected memory block formed in the first well sector for inhibiting erasure; applying an erase voltage to the first well sector; and, inhibiting application of the erase voltage to a second well sector including at least another two memory blocks. The method can further include decoupling bitline segments corresponding to the first well sector and the second well sector from each other before applying the erase voltage to the first well sector. Alternately, the method can further include decoupling bitline segments corresponding to the first well sector and the second well sector from each other with an isolation device when a bitline voltage of the first well sector is at least a predetermined bias voltage applied to a gate terminal of the isolation device.

Other aspects and features of the present invention will become apparent to those ordinarily skilled in the art upon review of the following description of specific embodiments of the invention in conjunction with the accompanying figures.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Embodiments of the present invention will now be described, by way of example only, with reference to the attached Figures, wherein:

FIG. 1A is a block diagram of a flash memory device;

FIG. 1B is a floor plan layout a prior art flash memory device;

FIG. 2 is a circuit schematic showing circuit details of two memory blocks in one memory array of the flash memory chip of FIG. 1B;

FIG. 3 is a cross-sectional diagram of one memory array of the flash memory chip of FIG. 1B;

FIG. 4 is a cross section diagram of a NAND cell string of FIG. 3;

FIG. 5 is a graph plotting the relationship between the substrate voltage V_{sub} and time;

FIG. 6 is a block diagram of a NAND flash memory bank according to an embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 7A is a block diagram of a row decoder used in the NAND flash memory bank of FIG. 6;

FIG. 7B is circuit schematic of a memory block drive circuit shown in FIG. 7A;

FIG. 8A is a block diagram of a NAND flash memory bank having one memory block per well sector, according to an example of the NAND flash memory bank of FIG. 6;

FIG. 8B is a cross-sectional diagram of one memory array of the NAND flash memory bank of FIG. 8A;

FIG. 9A is a block diagram of a NAND flash memory bank having multiple memory blocks per well sector, according to another example of the NAND flash memory bank of FIG. 6;

FIG. 9B is a cross-sectional diagram of one memory array of the NAND flash memory bank of FIG. 9A;

FIG. 10 is the cross-sectional diagram of FIG. 9B including isolation devices formed in-line with the bitlines;

FIG. 11 is a circuit schematic of a memory bank having dynamically controlled isolation devices, according to one example;

FIG. 12 is a circuit schematic of a memory bank having dynamically controlled isolation devices, according to another example;

FIG. 13 is a circuit schematic of a memory bank having dynamically controlled isolation devices, according to yet another example; and,

FIG. 14 is a flow chart showing a method of erasing a memory block, according an embodiment of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

A Flash memory device with reduced power consumption and minimal erase voltage disturb is obtained by forming all memory blocks in different well sectors. Each well sector can include for example, a device well within which the NAND cell strings of the memory block(s) are formed in, and isolation wells for isolating the substrate from the device wells. At least one well sector is selectively coupled to an erase voltage during an erase operation, such that unselected well sectors are inhibited from receiving the erase voltage, thereby minimizing erase disturb in the unselected well sectors. Because each well sector has a small area relative to a single well that includes all memory banks, the capacitance of each well sector is small. This results in several advantages such as higher speed erasing or reduced charge pump size, as will be discussed with reference to the following embodiments and examples.

FIG. 6 illustrates a NAND flash memory bank according to an embodiment of the present invention. The particular example illustrated in FIG. 6 has reduced substrate capacitance. FIG. 6 is a block diagram of one NAND flash memory bank **100**, including a memory array **102** having NAND cell strings similar to those shown in FIG. 2, a row decoder **104** for driving wordlines connected to the devices of the NAND cell strings, and a page buffer **106** connected to bitlines for coupling read and program data to the NAND cell strings. The memory array **102** includes at least two different well sectors where NAND cell strings are formed. The NAND cell strings are organized as memory blocks, such as those shown in FIG. 2, and each well sector includes at least one memory block. A charge pump **108** generates the erase voltage *Verase*, which is provided to a selector **110**. Selector **110** selectively passes *Verase* to one of the at least two well sectors of memory array **102**.

Row decoder **104** receives a block address for selecting a particular memory block for read, program and erase operations. Row decoder **104** further receives a multi-bit row address *RA* for providing individual row drive signals that are used for activating selected wordlines, string select lines *SSL* and source select lines *GSL*. Row address *RA* can be a pre-decoded row address or a row address provided from the address registers, or any other upstream circuit. In the presently shown example, a block address *B_ADDR*[1:*m*] is used to address up to 2^m memory blocks, where “*m*” can be any non zero integer value representing the number of individual address signals that make up *B_ADDR*[1:*m*]. Depending on the number of well sectors formed within memory array **102**, one or all individual address signals of *B_ADDR*[1:*m*] are provided to selector **110**. According to the present examples, the well sector including the memory block selected for erasure will be biased to *Verase*. All unselected well sectors are inhibited from receiving *Verase*, by biasing them to 0V or *VSS* for example.

FIG. 7A shows an example of row decoder **104** of NAND flash memory bank **100** shown in FIG. 6. Referring to FIGS. 6 and 7A, row decoder **104** includes row decode logic **120**, and memory block drive circuits **122** and **124** for respective memory blocks. In the particular example, there are four memory blocks in memory array **102**. Row decode logic **120** receives multi-bit row address *RA* for generating individual row drive signals such as *SS*, *S*[1:*i*] and *GS*. In the present example, there is one row decode logic **120** for all the memory blocks in memory array **102**, and the row drive signals *SS*, *S*[1:*i*] and *GS* are global signals provided to each memory block drive circuit **122** and **124** of the memory array **102**. In particular, global signals *SS*, *GS* and *S*[1:1] correspond respectively to *SSL*, *GSL* and wordlines in each memory block drive circuit, such as circuits **122** to **124** for example. Row decode logic **120** includes well known logic circuits for decoding multi-bit row address *RA* and its details are not described. FIG. 7A shows two memory block drive circuits **122** and **124**, but those skilled in the art will understand that there is one memory block drive circuit for each memory block in memory array **102**. In the present example, there are a total of four memory block drive circuits, two of which are not shown in order to simplify the drawing.

Memory block drive circuit **122** includes the same circuit elements as memory block drive circuit **124**, hence only the elements for memory block drive circuit **122** are described in further detail. Memory block drive circuit **122** includes a block decoder **126** and row drivers **128**. In the example shown in FIG. 7A, block decoder **126** of memory block drive circuit **122** receives a two-bit block addresses *B_ADDR*[1:2] for enabling its corresponding row drivers **128**. Accordingly, one

block decoder is enabled for any combination of *B_ADDR* [1:2] to select the memory block for an erase, program or read operation. Row drivers **128** includes devices for passing row drive signals *SS*, *S*[1:*i*] and *GS* to *SSL*, the wordlines *WL*[1:*i*] and *GSL*, respectively, of the NAND cell strings in the memory block. Therefore in response to the multi-bit row address *RA*, *SSL*, *GSL* and one wordline *WL*₁ to *WL*_{*i*}, are driven to the active logic level such as *VDD* by row decode logic **120**. In response to a block address, only the row drivers **128** of one selected memory block addressed by block addresses *B_ADDR*[1:2] are enabled for driving or passing the row drive signals *SS*, *S*[1:*i*] and *GS* as *SSL*, *WL*[1:*i*] and *GSL* respectively to the NAND cell strings. In an unselected memory block the row drivers **128** are disabled, thereby preventing *SSL*, *WL*[1:*i*] and *GSL* from receiving the voltage level of row drive signals *SS*, *S*[1:*i*] and *GS* respectively.

FIG. 7B is circuit schematic of the block decoder **126** and row drivers **128** of one memory block drive circuit, such as memory block drive circuit **122**, shown in FIG. 7A. Block decoder **126** is associated with one memory block, and includes a cross coupled inverter latch circuit and charge pump. The latch circuit includes cross-coupled inverters **130** and **132**, an n-channel reset transistor **134**, and n-channel enable transistors **136** and **138**. The latch circuit is enabled, or set, when latch enable signal *LTCH_EN* and a decoded block address *BA*[1:4] are at the high logic level. Decoded block address *BA*[1:4] is also referred to as a block select signal. The four individual signals of decoded block address *BA*[1:4] are generated by AND logic gate **140**, which receives block addresses *B_ADDR*[1] and *B_ADDR*[2]. Those skilled in the art should understand that the AND logic gate **140** for different block decoders **126** of the memory bank receives is responsive to different logic state combinations of *B_ADDR* [1] and *B_ADDR*[2] for selecting one memory block for read, program and erase operations. When a reset signal *RST_BD* is driven to the high logic level, of *VDD* for example, reset transistor **134** is turned on to couple the input of inverter **132** to *VSS*. This results in the latch circuit of inverters **130** and **132** to be reset.

The block decoder **126** includes a local charge pump coupled to the output of inverter **130**. The charge pump includes a depletion mode n-channel pass transistor **142**, a native n-channel diode-connected boost transistor **144**, a high breakdown voltage n-channel decoupling transistor **146**, a high breakdown voltage n-channel clamp transistor **148**, a NAND logic gate **150**, and a capacitor **152**. NAND logic gate **150** has one input terminal coupled to the output of inverter **130** and another input terminal for receiving controlled signal *OSC*, for driving one terminal of capacitor **152**. Pass transistor **142** is controlled by the complement of a program signal *PGM*, referred to as *PGMb*. The common terminals of decoupling transistor **146** and clamp transistor **148** are coupled to high voltage *VH*.

The operation of the charge pump is now described. During a read or erase operation, *PGMb* is at the high logic level and *OSC* is maintained at the low logic level. Therefore, circuit elements **152**, **144**, **146** and **148** are inactive, and the output terminal *BD_OUT* reflects the logic level appearing on the output of inverter **130**. During a program operation, *PGMb* is at the low logic level, and *OSC* is allowed to oscillate between the high and low logic levels at a predetermined frequency. If the output of inverter **130** is at the high logic level, then capacitor **152** will repeatedly accumulate charge on its other terminal and discharge the accumulated charge through boost transistor **144**. Decoupling transistor **146** isolates *VH* from the boosted voltage on the gate of boost transistor **144**. Clamp transistor **148** maintains the voltage level of output terminal

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BD_OUT at about $V_H + V_{tn}$, where V_{tn} is the threshold voltage of clamp transistor 148. The local charge pump shown in FIG. 7B is one example circuit which can be used to drive signals to a voltage levels higher than the supply voltage VDD, but persons skilled in the art will understand other charge pump circuits can be used with equal effectiveness.

Row drivers 128 includes a plurality of n-channel pass transistors 154, each having its gate terminal electrically coupled to the output terminal BD_OUT for passing the row drive signals SS, S[1:i] and GS at SSL, the wordlines WL[1:i] and GSL, respectively, to the NAND cell strings. If the output terminal BD_OUT is driven above VDD, then row drive signals SS, S[1:i] and GS greater than VDD can be passed onto SSL, WL[1:i] and GSL lines, respectively. If the output terminal BD_OUT is at VSS, then the pass transistors 154 will be turned off to decouple the row drive signals SS, S[1:i] and GS from SSL, WL[1:i] and GSL, respectively.

FIG. 8A shows a NAND flash memory bank according to an example of the NAND flash memory bank embodiment of FIG. 6. The NAND flash memory bank has reduced substrate capacitance. Referring to FIG. 8A, one NAND flash memory bank 200 has a memory array 202 including NAND cell strings similar to those shown in FIG. 2. The NAND flash memory bank 200 has also a row decoder 204 for driving wordlines connected to the devices of the NAND cell strings, and a page buffer 206 connected to bitlines for coupling read and program data to the NAND cell strings. A charge pump 208 generates the erase voltage Verase, which is provided to a selector 210. In the illustrated example, the memory array 202 has four different well sectors, each selectively receiving Verase during a block erase operation. Each of the four well sectors includes exactly one memory block, referred to as Block[1], Block[2], Block[3] and Block[4]. Accordingly, a two-bit block address B_ADDR[1:2] is used for selecting one of four memory blocks, and row decoder 204 includes the appropriate logic for decoding the two-bit block address B_ADDR[1:2]. The same block address is received by selector 210 for passing Verase to the well sector which includes the corresponding selected memory block. Selector 210 can be implemented as a 1 to 4 demultiplexor responsive to a two-bit control or address signal.

FIG. 8B is a cross-sectional diagram of memory array 202 taken along line B-B' in FIG. 8A, and angled to show specific features on its surface. In FIG. 8B, only the first three well sectors 220, 222 and 224 are shown, where each well sector includes a p-type well 226 formed within an n-type isolation well 228, the n-type isolation well 228 being formed within a p-type substrate 230. Both the n-type isolation well 228 and the p-type well 226 are ion implanted regions having two-dimensional surface areas on the chip formed through well known masking steps that delineate their specific shapes. Because the substrate 230 is p-type, the n-type isolation wells 228 are used to electrically isolate the p-type substrate 230 from the p-type wells 226. The depth and concentration of wells 226 and 228 is determined by the ion implantation energy and dose, which are both fabrication design parameters of the semiconductor device. As clearly shown in FIG. 8B, the NAND cell strings are formed in the p-type wells 226. In an alternate example where substrate 230 is n-type instead of p-type, the n-type isolation wells 228 are omitted, and the well sectors 220, 222 and 224 have p-type wells 226. According to the present examples, each well sector includes at least the device well the NAND cell strings are formed within, and optionally includes isolation wells for isolating the substrate 230 from the device wells 226.

In the presently shown example of memory array 202, well sectors 220, 222 and 224 include memory blocks 234, 236

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and 238 respectively. Each memory block includes NAND cell strings 232 electrically coupled to respective bitlines, such as bitlines BL_k and BL_{k+1} to BL_j for example. While not shown in FIG. 8B, the bitlines are connected to a page buffer for sensing cell data and for providing program data. The possible circuit implementations of page buffers, and their operation should be well known to persons of skill in the art. The selector 210 is shown in FIG. 8B to show its interconnection with the well sectors 220, 222 and 224 of memory array 202. Selector 210 receives Verase and electrically couples Verase to one of the four well sectors in response to the two-bit block address B_ADDR[1:2]. As shown in FIG. 8B, each output of selector 210 is connected to a respective p-type well 226 as well as its corresponding isolation well 228. This is to ensure that the junction between the p-type substrate 230 and the n-type isolation well 228 is reverse biased.

The advantage of having separate well sectors for each memory block of the memory bank is the reduced capacitive loading of the charge pump relative to the single well memory bank of the known NAND flash memory bank of FIG. 3. An example comparison between the single well memory bank of FIG. 3 and the multiple well sector example of FIGS. 8A and 8B follows. It is first assumed that the memory bank of FIG. 3 and the memory bank of FIG. 8A include exactly four memory blocks, have the same number of NAND cell strings per memory block, and the same charge pump fabricated with the same process and technology node. As previously discussed, t_{delay} is the amount of time p-type well 54 charges up from VSS to Verase during an erase operation for erasing one memory block. In the NAND flash memory bank of FIG. 8A/8B, the capacitance of one p-type well 226 is effectively $\frac{1}{4}$ that of p-type well 54. Accordingly, the voltage level of p-type well 226 will rise from VSS to Verase in less time than t_{delay} . Alternatively, if the erase time of the memory bank of FIG. 3 is to be maintained for the NAND flash memory bank of FIG. 8A, then the charge pump circuit capacity can be decreased. This can be done through a combination of reducing the size of capacitor elements and/or eliminating entire capacitor elements. Therefore semiconductor chip area is reduced, and the cost of the NAND flash memory device is correspondingly reduced. Furthermore, since the capacitance of each well sector is smaller than that of p-type well 54, significant power savings is realized.

A further advantage of the NAND flash memory bank of FIGS. 8A and 8B is that unselected memory blocks do not receive Verase, thereby eliminating erase disturb in the unselected memory blocks. This is because each memory block of FIGS. 8A and 8B resides in its own well sector. Accordingly, the wordlines in the unselected memory blocks residing in unselected well sectors do not self-boost, and are allowed to float at about the VSS voltage level.

An erase operation executed upon the example NAND flash memory bank of FIGS. 8A and 8B is now described with reference to the memory block drive circuit 122 shown in FIG. 7B. In the erase operation for the example of FIGS. 8A and 8B, one memory block is selected while other blocks remain unselected. In otherwords, one memory block is enabled while remaining memory blocks are disabled. In the present example erase operation, it is assumed that only memory block Block[1] is to be erased. Accordingly, the operation of memory block drive circuit 122 is described, while the operation of memory block drive circuit 124 is described for any one of the unselected memory blocks. To select a memory block for erasure, LTCH_EN and BA[1:4] of memory block drive circuit 122 will be at the high logic level, thereby setting the level shifter circuit to output high voltage

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Vh. Therefore, all the pass transistors **154** of wordline driver circuit **128** are turned on. The row drive signals **S1** to **Si** are driven to VSS while row drive signals **SS** and **GS** are floated, and the selected well sector having the selected memory block is biased to Verase. Memory block drive circuit **124** for an unselected memory block will have its corresponding block decoder circuit output set to output low voltage **Vn**. Therefore, all the pass transistors **154** corresponding to the unselected memory blocks will be turned off. Accordingly, the wordlines, SSL and GSL for the unselected memory blocks will float at approximately VSS, since these lines are typically biased to VSS after any read or program operation.

Table 1 below summarizes example biasing conditions during an erase operation for a selected memory block and an unselected memory block, where the selected memory block resides in one well sector and the unselected memory block resides in a different well sector. A memory block is selected by providing the block address **B_ADDR[1:2]** of the selected memory block to row decoder **204**, which is decoded to enable control of the wordlines and select lines (SSL and GSL) corresponding to the selected memory block. Because **B_ADDR[1:2]** is received by selector **210**, Verase is passed to the well sector which includes the selected memory block.

TABLE 1

	Selected Well Sector Selected Memory Block	Unselected Well Sector Unselected Memory Block
Bitlines (B/L)	Clamped to Verase-0.6 V	Clamped to Verase-0.6 V
String Select Line (SSL)	Floated	Unselected
Wordlines	0 V	Unselected
Ground Select Line (GSL)	Floated	Unselected
Common Source Line (CSL)	Clamped to Verase-0.6 V	0 V
P-Well	Verase	0 V

In order to erase a selected memory block in the example NAND flash memory bank of FIGS. **8A** and **8B**, the wordlines are biased to VSS, or 0V, the common source line CSL (hereinafter referred to as "CSL line") is clamped to about Verase-0.6V, and SSL and GSL are left to float. Decoded row drive signals **SS** and **GS** for the SSL and GSL lines are floated during erase to minimize the electric field on pass transistors for SSL and GSL. It is noted that the capacitance of drive lines **SS** and **GS** are much larger than that of SSL and GSL. Therefore, SSL and GSL may remain at nearly VSS because any boosted charge on SSL and GSL resulting from the well voltage rising to Verase will leak through the pass transistors to the **SS** and **GS** drive lines.

Finally, the selected well sector within which the selected memory block resides is biased to Verase. Under these conditions, trapped charge in the floating gates of the flash memory cells of the NAND cell strings will emit their charge to the well. As previously shown in FIG. **2** and FIG. **4**, all bitlines are shared by the memory blocks in the memory bank, and have bitline contacts electrically connected to the n+ diffusion region **88** corresponding to each NAND cell string. The n+ diffusion regions **88** are forward biased when the selected well sector is raised to the erase voltage Verase, resulting in the bitlines being clamped to Verase-0.6V. As previously shown in FIG. **2** and FIG. **4**, the CSL line is shared by all the NAND cell strings in the same memory block via n+ diffusion region **82**. Hence when the selected well sector is raised to Verase, the n+ diffusion region **82** is forward biased

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raise and clamp the CSL line of the selected memory block in the selected well sector to Verase-0.6V. On the other hand, the CSL line for an unselected memory block in an unselected well sector is biased to VSS or 0V. It is noted that in the present examples, the CSL line is common only to the NAND cell strings of one memory block. All wordlines, string select lines (SSL) and ground select lines (GSL) in the unselected memory block remain in an unselected state, meaning that the pass transistors **154** in the wordline driver **128** are turned off.

FIGS. **8A** and **8B** illustrate an example NAND flash memory bank where there is exactly one memory block per well sector in memory bank array **202**. Depending on the fabrication process and technology node being used for manufacturing NAND flash memory bank **200**, adjacent well sectors are spaced from each other by a minimum distance "D", as shown in FIG. **8B**. This minimum distance D can be set to be the minimum design rule spacing for adjacent n-type isolation wells. By example only, the spacing between adjacent n-type isolation wells **228** can be between 3 to 10 microns.

In another example of memory array **202**, each well sector of the memory bank includes more than one memory block to minimize the size of the memory array while reducing the capacitance of each well sector. FIG. **9A** is a block diagram of a NAND flash memory bank with reduced memory array area relative to the example NAND flash memory bank of FIG. **8A**. Referring to FIG. **9A**, one NAND flash memory bank **300** has a memory array **302** including NAND cell strings similar to those shown in FIG. **2**, a row decoder **304** for driving wordlines connected to the devices of the NAND cell strings, and a page buffer **306** connected to bitlines for coupling read and program data to the NAND cell strings. A charge pump **308** generates the erase voltage Verase, which is provided to a selector **310**. By example only, the illustrated NAND flash memory bank has a memory array **302** including two different well sectors, each selectively receiving Verase during a block erase operation. Memory array **302** includes four memory blocks, referred to as Block[1], Block[2], Block[3] and Block[4]. Accordingly, a two-bit block address **B_ADDR[1:2]** is used for selecting one of four memory blocks and row decoder **304** includes the appropriate logic for decoding the two-bit block address **B_ADDR[1:2]**.

In the memory array **302**, a first well sector includes memory blocks Block[1] and Block[2], and a second well sector includes memory blocks Block[3] and Block[4]. A pair of two well sectors is selected during an erase operation. A single bit block address signal is received by selector **310** for passing Verase to the well sector which includes the selected memory block. If **B_ADDR[1]** is the most significant block address bit for selecting which pair of memory blocks is to be selected, then **B_ADDR[2]** is the least significant block address bit for selecting one memory block of the selected pair of memory blocks. Selector **310** is a 1-to-2 demultiplexer, or selector, responsive to a single-bit control or address signal. Because the example of FIG. **9A** has two memory blocks formed in each well sector, only one of the two well sectors is selected for any memory block erase operation. Therefore block address **B_ADDR[1]** is used by selector **310** for passing Verase to one of the two well sectors. In other words, selector **310** receives a portion of the block address for selectively passing Verase to one of the two well sectors.

FIG. **9B** is a cross-sectional diagram of memory array **302** of FIG. **9A** taken along line C-C', and angled to show specific features on its surface. In FIG. **9B**, two well sectors **320** and **322** are shown, where each well sector includes a p-type well **324** formed within an n-type isolation well **326**, the n-type

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isolation well **326** being formed within a p-type substrate **328**. Both the n-type isolation well **326** and the p-type well **324** are ion implanted regions having two-dimensional surface areas on the chip formed through well known masking steps that delineate their specific shapes. The depth and concentration of wells **226** and **228** is determined by the ion implantation energy and dose, which are both fabrication design parameters of the semiconductor device. As clearly shown in FIG. 9B, the NAND cell strings are formed in the p-type wells **324**. In an alternate example where substrate **328** is n-type instead of p-type, the n-type isolation wells **326** are omitted, and the well sectors **320** and **322** have p-type wells **324**. According to the present examples, each well sector includes at least the

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Verase. For example, if memory block **332** (Block[2]) is selected for erasure, then the wordlines and select lines (SSL and GSL) corresponding to selected memory block **332** are biased to the erase condition, and Verase is applied to well sector **320**. Memory block **330** is erase inhibited to prevent erasure of its flash memory cells because it is formed within the same p-type well **324** as memory block **332**.

Table 2 summarizes example biasing conditions during an erase operation for a selected memory block and an unselected memory block in the selected well sector that receives Verase, and for unselected memory blocks in an unselected well sector that does not receive Verase.

TABLE 2

	Selected well sector		Unselected well
	Selected Memory Block	Unselected Memory Blocks	sector All Memory Blocks
Bitlines (BL)	Clamped to Verase -0.6 V	Clamped to Verase -0.6 V	Clamped to Verase -0.6 V
String Select Line (SSL)	Floated	Boosted to about 90% of Verase	Unselected
Wordlines (WL0-WL31)	0 V	Boosted to about 90% of Verase	Unselected
Ground Select Line (GSL)	Floated	Boosted to about 90% of Verase	Unselected
Common Source Line (CSL)	Clamped to Verase -0.6 V	Clamped to Verase -0.6 V	0 V
Well sector	Verase	Verase	0 V

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device well the NAND cell strings are formed within, and optionally includes isolation wells for isolating the substrate from the device wells.

In the presently shown example of memory array **302**, well sector **320** includes memory blocks **330** and **332**, which correspond to memory blocks Block[1] and Block[2] respectively. Well sector **322** includes memory blocks **334** and **336**, which correspond to memory blocks Block[3] and Block[4] respectively. Each memory block includes NAND cell strings **338** electrically coupled to respective bitlines, such as bitlines BL_k and BL_{k+1} to BL_j for example. While not shown in FIG. 9B, the bitlines are connected to a page buffer for sensing cell data and for providing program data. The possible circuit implementation of page buffers, and their operation should be well known to persons of skill in the art. The selector **310** is shown in FIG. 9B to show its interconnection with the well sectors **320** and **322** of memory array **302**. Selector **310** receives Verase and electrically couples Verase to one of the two well sectors in response to the single-bit block address B_ADDR[1]. As shown in FIG. 9B, each output of selector **310** is connected to a respective p-type well **324** as well as its corresponding isolation well **326**.

The erase operation for a selected memory block in the example NAND flash memory bank of FIGS. 9A and 9B is similar to that described for the example NAND flash memory bank of FIGS. 8A and 8B, except that an erase inhibit scheme is applied to the unselected memory block of the selected well sector that receives the erase voltage Verase. This is due to the fact that each well sector has both a selected memory block to be erased and an unselected memory block. Therefore, the flash memory cells of the unselected memory block in the well sector receiving Verase is erase inhibited. By example, the previously described self-boosting erase inhibit scheme can be used for inhibiting erasure of the flash memory cells of the unselected memory block in the selected well sector, where a selected well sector is the one that receives

The erase bias conditions for the word lines and SSL and GSL are the same as for the NAND flash memory bank examples of FIGS. 8A, 8B and FIGS. 9A, 9B, as are the bias conditions for the unselected memory blocks in the unselected well sectors. However, for the unselected memory blocks of the selected well sector, the wordlines are self boosted to about Verase. When the wordlines are approximately Verase, there is a minimal electrical field formed between the wordlines and the p-type well **324** of the selected well sector, thereby inhibiting erasure of the flash memory cells of the unselected memory block.

While FIGS. 8A, 8B and 9A, 9B show examples where there is exactly one memory block formed per well sector and two memory blocks formed per well sector in one memory array, alternate examples can include any number of well sectors in each memory array, where each well sector can include any number of memory blocks formed therein.

In both the example NAND flash memory banks of FIGS. 8A, 8B and 9A, 9B, the voltage of the bitlines rises to about Verase-0.6V when the p-type well of the well sector rises to Verase. With reference to FIG. 4 for example, the p-type well **54** and the n+ diffusion region **88** has a p-n junction that is forward biased when Verase is applied. Accordingly, bitline **90** will clamp to about Verase-0.6V, where 0.6V is the forward bias voltage drop across the p-n junction. Each bitline is electrically connected to the NAND cell strings in each memory block of the memory array. Accordingly, this clamped voltage of the bitline is applied to the n+ diffusion regions **88** of all the NAND cell strings of the column, and notably to the n+ diffusion regions **88** of the NAND cell strings in the unselected well sectors. Since the unselected well sectors are biased to VSS, or float near VSS, the bitlines potentially provide a charge leakage path between the selected well sector and one or more unselected well sectors. More specifically, Verase being applied to the selected well sector can be discharged to VSS through the unselected well

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sector if junction breakdown occurs at the p-n junctions of the n+ diffusion region **88** and the p-type well **54** of each NAND cell string. This can delay the rise of Verase in the selected well sector, or even disrupt the erase process if the selected well sector voltage never fully reaches Verase. With this understanding of the bitline voltage during erase operations, the junction breakdown voltage of the n+ diffusion region **88** is engineered to withstand breakdown when the bitline rises to Verase-0.6V.

Although junction breakdown engineering is a possible solution to this problem, a simpler solution is to electrically isolate the bitline connected to the selected well sector from the unselected well sectors. According to a present embodiment, since well sectors are spaced from each other due to design rules, an isolation device is included in-line with the bitline between well sectors. FIG. **10** illustrates an example of this embodiment.

FIG. **10** is another example of the memory array **302** shown in FIGS. **9A** and **9B**. In FIG. **10**, memory array **400** has the same elements as those shown in FIG. **9B**. In order to isolate the bitlines connected to one well sector from the NAND cell strings of another well sector, isolation devices, such as n-channel transistors **402** are formed in the space between well sectors. The n-channel transistors **402** can be formed as high voltage transistor devices, at the same time other high voltage transistor devices are formed on the memory device. The bitlines electrically connected to the NAND cell strings of one well sector are connected to one terminal of isolation devices **402**, while the bitlines electrically connected to the NAND cell strings of an adjacent well sector are connected to the other terminal of isolation devices **402**. Therefore, the bitlines connected to the NAND cell strings in one well sector are referred to as bitline segments. In FIG. **10**, these bitline segments are indicated by reference numbers **404**. If there are more than two well sectors in memory array **400**, then there are additional isolation devices **402** connected in-line or in series, with each bitline segment **404**. The gate terminals of all the isolation devices **400** receive a bias voltage Viso, which is selected to be at least a voltage level sufficiently high for passing the highest voltage level that is applied to the bitline during read and program operations. The isolation devices are hence enabled during a read or program operation. In other words, the gate terminals of all the isolation devices can be overdriven to a level above the supply voltage VDD. There may be devices where overdriving the gate terminals is not necessary, and it is sufficient to drive them to the supply voltage VDD.

For example, if VDD is applied to bitlines during a programming operation for programming a particular logic state to a flash memory cell, then the bias voltage Viso should be at least $VDD + V_{tn}$, where V_{tn} is a threshold voltage of an n-channel transistor. By setting Viso to such a voltage level, a full VDD voltage level is maintained in all bitline segments during programming. During an erase operation for a memory block in a selected well sector, the corresponding bitline segment will rise to about Verase-0.6V. But because the isolation devices **404** have their gates biased to $Viso = VDD + V_{tn}$, the other bitline segments are limited to being charged to VDD. Therefore, minimal additional junction breakdown engineering is required since the n+ diffusion region connected to the bitlines is already designed to withstand a VDD voltage level.

In one example of the memory array **400**, Viso is statically maintained at the same voltage level during read, program and erase operations. Persons skilled in the art should understand that there are different ways to provide Viso. In an alternate example Viso can be a decoded signal, meaning that

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Viso is selectively applied to the gates of the isolation devices adjacent to the selected well sector.

FIG. **11** is a circuit schematic of an example of the embodiment of FIG. **10**. In FIG. **11**, one memory bank has a memory array with dynamically activated isolation devices formed between well sectors for defining bitline segments, and a bitline segment decoder for selectively isolating one bitline segment from the other bitline segments in each column. The row decoder is not shown in order to simplify the schematic, but those skilled in the art will understand that they are necessary for driving the wordlines of the NAND cell strings in each memory block. A memory bank **500** includes a memory array **502**, a page buffer **504** and a bitline segment decoder **506**. Memory array **502** of the present example includes four well sectors **508**, **510**, **512** and **514**, where each well sector includes exactly one memory block. Accordingly, memory array **502** has the same structure as memory array **202** of FIGS. **8A/8B**. Formed between each well sector are isolation devices **516**, each being an n-channel transistor for the present example. Bitline segments **518** are connected to the NAND cell strings in each memory block, and are connected to an isolation device at both ends. Bitline tail segments **520** and **522** are bitline segments which are not connected to any NAND cell strings and are connected to one isolation device **516** and some other terminating circuit. For example, bitline tail segments **520** are connected to isolation devices **516** above well sector **508** and to a bitline precharge circuit **524**. Bitline tail segments **522** on the other hand are connected to isolation devices **516** below well sector **514** and to page buffer **504**. While the present example of FIG. **11** shows each well sector having one memory block formed therein, according to alternate examples each well sector can have multiple memory blocks formed therein, where a bitline segment is commonly connected to the multiple memory blocks residing in the same well sector. The isolation devices **516** driven by NAND logic gate **532** and NAND logic gate **540** are optional, meaning that the bitline segments **518** corresponding to well sectors **508** and **514** can extend to the precharge circuit **524** and the page buffer **504** respectively.

Bitline segment decoder **506** is responsible for disabling, rendering electrically non-conductive, or turning off, the selected isolation devices **516** for isolating a bitline segment **518** corresponding to a selected well sector including the selected memory block to be erased, from all other bitline segments **518**. Bitline segment decoder **506** includes OR logic gates **526**, **528** and **530**, and NAND logic gates **532**, **534**, **536**, **538** and **540**. Each of OR logic gates **526**, **528** and **530** receives two different well sector selection signals, and more specifically, two well sector selection signals corresponding to adjacent well sectors. Because adjacent well sectors share the same isolation device **516**, an OR logic gate is used to disable the isolation devices **516** between two adjacent well sectors when either is selected or addressed for an erase operation. In the example of FIG. **11**, the well sector selection signals correspond to decoded block address BA[1:4] because there is exactly one memory block in each well sector. The number of well sector selection signals required by bitline segment decoder **506** depends on the number of well sectors in the memory array of the memory bank. For example, if there were exactly two memory blocks in each well sector of FIG. **11**, then there are a total of eight (8) memory blocks. Accordingly, three block address signals are used for individually selecting one of eight memory blocks, but two of the most significant block address signals can be used for generating the well sector selection signals. For example, a modified version of the memory block drive circuit **122** of FIG. **7B** can have a three input AND logic gate

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instead of the 2 input AND logic gate **140** for decoding B_ADDR[1], B_ADDR[2] and B_ADDR[3] to perform a one of eight selection. Accordingly, persons skilled in the art will understand that there would be a total of eight memory block drive circuits, one for each memory block. In the present example, the two most significant block addresses B_ADDR[3] and B_ADDR[2] are decoded using well known logic to provide four well sector selection signals.

NAND logic gates **534**, **536** and **538** each have a first input for receiving the output of OR logic gates **526**, **528** and **530** respectively. NAND logic gate **532** has a first input for receiving a well sector selection signal directly because the isolation devices **516** above well sector **508** are not shared with another well sector. Similarly, NAND logic gate **540** has a first input for receiving a well sector selection signal directly because the isolation devices **516** below well sector **514** are not shared with another well sector. The second input of all the NAND logic gates receives an erase signal ERASE, and the output of each NAND logic gate drives a set of isolation devices **516** adjacent to at least one well sector. The high logic level output of each NAND logic gate is set such that the isolation devices **516** are driven to a voltage level sufficient to allow the maximum bitline voltage level to pass through it. For example, if the maximum bitline voltage is VDD then the NAND logic gates are supplied with a positive voltage higher than VDD.

According to the present example, signal ERASE is set to the low logic level for a read or program operation, thereby turning on or overdriving all the isolation devices **516**. As previously stated all the NAND logic gates can be supplied with a voltage level greater than the VDD supply voltage. Therefore the logic states of the well sector selection signals BA[1:4] are ignored. During an erase operation, signal ERASE is set to the high logic level. Now NAND logic gates **532** and **540** are responsive to the well sector selection signals BA[1:4], and NAND logic gates **534**, **536** and **538** are responsive to an output of a corresponding OR logic gate. The NAND logic gates are responsive by driving their outputs to the inactive logic level when their first and second inputs are both at the high logic level. Accordingly, when one well sector selection signal is at the active high logic level, the sets of isolation devices adjacent to the correspondingly selected well sector are turned off. Then the erase voltage Verase is applied to the selected well sector.

For example, if a memory block in well sector **510** is to be erased, then only address BA[2] is driven to the high logic level. Then NAND logic gates **534** and **536** drive their respective outputs to the low logic level, such as VSS, and the isolation devices **516** having their gates electrically coupled to the outputs of NAND logic gates **534** and **536** will turn off. Therefore, the bitline segments **518** of well sector **510** are isolated from the other bitline segments of the other well sectors.

In the example of FIG. **11**, bitline segments **518** are selectively disconnected from the other bitline segments in response to decoded block addresses BA[1:4] during an erase operation. In an alternate example, all the isolation devices are globally enabled and disabled in response to the operating mode of the memory device. More specifically, if an erase operation is executed, then all the isolation devices **516** are turned off independently of any address information.

FIG. **12** is a circuit schematic of one memory bank having a memory array with dynamically activated isolation devices formed between well sectors, according to an alternate example of the embodiment of FIG. **10**. In FIG. **12**, memory bank **550** includes the same memory array **502** shown in FIG. **11**, but now bitline segment decoder **506** is replaced with a

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simple segment decoupling logic **552**. Segment decoupling logic **552** includes inverters **554**, **556**, **558**, **560** and **562**, each of which receives the erase signal ERASE in parallel, and drives a respective set of isolation devices **516**. In the present example, the inverters are provided with a supply voltage VDD or a voltage level greater than VDD to overdrive the isolation devices **516** during non-erase operations. In an erase operation, signal ERASE is driven to the high logic level, and all the inverters drive the gates of the isolation devices **516** to VSS. All the isolation devices **516** turn off, resulting in all the bitline segments **518** being isolated from each other, and Verase is applied to the selected well sector that includes the memory block to be erased. In a program or read operation, ERASE is at the low logic level, and the isolation devices have their gates driven to a voltage level of at least VDD.

In both the examples of FIGS. **11** and **12**, ERASE is at the inactive low logic level during a read or program operation to ensure that all the isolation devices **516** are at least turned on, or overdriven. Unfortunately, a known issue affecting sensing time is bitline capacitance. Those skilled in the art understand that as the bitline length increases, its capacitance increases as well. Because the current through a conducting flash memory cell is small, this current is difficult to sense when the bitline capacitance is high. Therefore, the isolation devices shown in FIGS. **11** and **12** can be used in an alternate embodiment of the invention to reduce bitline capacitance to shorten sensing time.

FIG. **13** is a circuit schematic of an alternate memory bank **570** according to an example of the embodiment for reducing bitline capacitance to shorten sensing time. Memory array **502** is the same as the one shown in FIG. **11**, but an alternate bitline segment decoder **572** according to an example of the present embodiment is illustrated. Bitline segment decoder **572** turns off all the isolation devices **516** in memory array **502** during an erase operation, and selectively turns off specific isolation devices **516** during a read operation. In FIG. **13**, bitline segment decoder **572** includes an inverter **574** having its output for providing an isolation drive signal coupled to a respective set of isolation devices **516** between the bitline precharge circuit **524** and well sector **508**, and OR logic gates **576**, **578**, **580** and **582** each having an output for providing an isolation drive signal coupled to respective sets of isolation devices **516**. A first input of OR logic gates **576**, **578**, **580** and **582** is coupled to the outputs of NOR logic gates **584**, **586**, **588** and **590** respectively. Inverter **574** and each pairing of a NOR logic gate and OR logic gate are referred to as an isolation device driver, having outputs for driving respective isolation devices. A second input of OR logic gates **578**, **580** and **582** receives the output of another isolation device driver, while the second input of OR logic gate **576** is grounded. Each isolation device driver provides its isolation drive signal for one set of isolation devices **516** to one isolation device driver that provides its isolation drive signal to a second set of isolation devices **516**, where the second set of isolation devices is located between the first set of isolation devices and the page buffer **504**. A first input of OR logic gates **584**, **586**, **588** and **590** receives the erase signal ERASE. A second input of NOR logic gates **584**, **586**, **588** and **590** is an inverted input, and receives well sector selection signals BA[1], BA[2], BA[3] and BA[4] respectively.

As previously mentioned for the example arrangement of memory array **502**, each well sector includes one memory block, hence decoded block addresses BA[1:4] can be used as the well sector selection signals. The operation of bitline segment decoder **572** is straightforward during an erase operation. Signal ERASE is set to the active high logic level, thereby causing each NOR logic gate to provide a low logic

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level output which is passed by each OR logic gate as the isolation drive signal to all the isolation devices **516**. Therefore all the isolation devices **516** are turned off while ERASE is at the high logic level, and Verase can be applied to the selected well sector.

During a read operation, only the isolation devices **516** located between the well sector containing the selected memory block and the page buffer **504** are turned on, or overdriven. All other isolation devices are turned off to minimize the bitline capacitance seen by the selected NAND cell strings of the selected memory block. For example, when a memory block in well sector **512** is selected for a read operation, isolation devices **516** between well sectors **512** and **514** are turned on, as are the isolation devices **516** between well sector **514** and page buffer **504**. Therefore during a read operation for a selected memory block, only the bitline segments **518** corresponding to the selected well sector including the selected memory block, and the bitline segments **518** corresponding to all the other intervening well sectors between the selected well sector and the page buffer are electrically coupled to each other. In the example of FIG. **13**, each OR logic gate of the isolation device driver is an address overrider circuit. It is noted that the isolation device driver having inverter **574** does not include a NOR logic gate and an OR logic gate, since there are no further well sectors between the isolation devices **516** it controls and bitline precharge circuit **524**. The address overrider circuit allows for an isolation device driver activated by a well sector selection signal to enable or activate the next set of isolation devices **516** proximate to the page buffer **504**.

In an example read operation the selected memory block resides in well sector **510**, thus BA[2] is driven to the high logic level and ERASE is at the low logic level. With ERASE at the low logic level, inverter **574** turns on or overdrives its isolation devices. NOR gate **584** provides a low logic level output since BA[1] is at the low logic level, which is passed by OR gate **576** to its respective set of isolation devices **516**. NOR gate **586** provides a high logic level output to OR gate **578**, which also receives the low logic level output from OR gate **576**. Accordingly, the isolation devices **516** between well sectors **510** and **512** are turned on or overdriven. With BA[3] at the low logic level, NOR gate **588** drives its output to the low logic level. However, the high logic level output of OR gate **578** is received by OR gate **580**. Therefore the output of NOR gate **588** is overridden. Similarly, the output of NOR gate **590** is overridden by OR gate **582**, thus the isolation devices **516** between well sectors **512** and **514** and page buffer **504** are turned on.

With the reading scheme shown in FIG. **13**, the worst case read situation occurs when the selected memory block resides within well sector **508**, which is the furthest from page buffer **504**. On the other hand, the best case read situation occurs when the selected memory block resides within well sector **514**, which is the closest to page buffer **504**. Therefore, the sense timing and data output transfer timing can be adjusted based on the selected well sector that includes the selected memory block to be read. In one example application, a specific number of the memory blocks formed in well sectors proximate to the page buffer **504** can be designated as high speed memory blocks. The remaining memory blocks residing in the well sectors further from the page buffer **504** can be designated as regular speed memory blocks. While in use with an external system, data can be selectively stored in either high speed or regular speed memory blocks for high speed or regular speed read operations.

FIG. **14** is a flow chart summarizing the method by which a selected memory block is erased, in accordance with the

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previously described embodiments of the invention. The following method is applicable to a memory array having any number of well sectors, where each well sector includes at least one memory bank. Starting at step **600** a selected memory block is biased for erasing, which is done by setting the wordlines, SSL and GSL to the appropriate erase bias conditions. Table 2 illustrates example erase bias conditions for the memory block to be erased. If each well sector includes at least two memory blocks, then there is an unselected memory block in the same well sector as the selected memory block to be erased. Therefore at step **602**, the unselected memory block in the same well sector as the selected memory block is biased to inhibit erase of its memory cells. Once again, Table 2 illustrates example erase inhibit bias conditions for the wordlines, SSL and GSL. If on the other hand each well sector includes exactly one memory block, then step **602** is skipped. Proceeding to step **604**, the erase voltage is applied to the well sector containing the selected memory block. Following at step **606**, the bitline segments of the selected well sector are decoupled from the other bitline segments either at the same time or just after Verase is applied to the selected well sector. It is noted that it is sufficient to decouple the bitline segment of the selected well sector from the bitline segments of adjacent well sectors. This decoupling is either dynamic decoupling or static decoupling. Static decoupling occurs when the isolation devices are statically biased to Viso, and the bitline segments of the selected well sector self-decouple from the other bitline segments as its voltage rises past Viso. Dynamic decoupling occurs by actively turning off the isolation devices either globally in response to a single control signal, such as ERASE, or in response to a well sector selection signal. If dynamic decoupling is used, then the isolation devices can be turned off prior to application of Verase to the selected well sector.

The presently shown memory bank embodiments and examples of the invention reduce power consumption while improving the speed at which a memory block is erased by forming well sectors that can be selectively biased to the required erase voltage. Each well sector has at least one memory block formed therein, and thus has a lower capacitance than prior art NAND flash memory arrays that have all memory blocks formed in one large well. All the previously described memory bank embodiments and examples can be used in the NAND memory device of FIG. **1A**, or the NAND memory device chip of FIG. **1B**.

As shown by the previous embodiments and examples, a memory array of a memory bank will have reduced well capacitance by forming at least two well sectors, each well sector having at least one memory block formed therein. The reduced well capacitance allows for higher erase speeds for the selected memory block than prior art single well memory arrays. If erase performance is a non-critical specification for the NAND flash memory device having multiple well sectors in its memory bank, the charge pump size can be reduced while maintaining erase speeds similar to that of prior art NAND flash memory devices. In the embodiments and examples described above, the device elements are connected to each other as shown in the figures, for the sake of simplicity. In practical applications of the present invention to an apparatus, devices, elements, circuits, etc. may be connected directly to each other. As well, devices, elements, circuits etc. may be connected indirectly to each other through other devices, elements, circuits, etc., necessary for operation of the apparatus. Thus, in actual configuration, the circuit elements and devices are directly or indirectly coupled with, or connected to, each other.

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In the preceding description, for purposes of explanation, numerous details and examples are set forth in order to provide a thorough understanding of the embodiments of the invention. However, it will be apparent to one skilled in the art that these specific details are not required in order to practice the invention. In other instances, well-known electrical structures and circuits are shown in block diagram form in order not to obscure the invention. For example, specific details are not provided as to whether the embodiments of the invention described herein are implemented as a software routine, hardware circuit, firmware, or a combination thereof.

The above-described embodiments of the invention are intended to be examples only. Alterations, modifications and variations can be effected to the particular embodiments by those of skill in the art without departing from the scope of the invention, which is defined solely by the claims appended hereto.

What is claimed is:

1. A NAND Flash memory comprising:
 - a first memory block with a first NAND cell string;
 - a second memory block with a second NAND cell string;
 - a first well sector including the first memory block configured to selectively receive an erase voltage during an erase operation;
 - a second well sector including the second memory block configured to be inhibited from receiving the erase voltage during the erase operation;
 - a bitline (BLk) electrically connected to the first NAND cell string and the second NAND cell string, the bitline comprising:
 - a first bitline segment electrically connected to the first NAND cell string of the first well sector, and
 - a second bitline segment electrically connected to the second NAND cell string of the second well sector;
 - and
 - a page buffer electrically connected to the bitline.
2. The NAND Flash memory of claim 1, wherein the first well sector includes a third NAND cell string electrically connected to a second bitline, and the second well sector includes a fourth NAND cell string electrically connected to the second bitline, the second bitline being electrically connected to the page buffer.
3. The NAND Flash memory of claim 2, wherein the first NAND cell string and the third NAND cell string are part of the first memory block, and the second NAND cell string and the fourth NAND cell string are part of the second memory block.
4. The NAND Flash memory of claim 1, wherein the first well sector includes a third NAND cell string electrically connected to the bitline, and the second well sector includes a fourth NAND cell string electrically connected to the bitline.
5. The NAND Flash memory of claim 4, wherein the first NAND cell string is part of the first memory block, the third NAND cell string is part of a third memory block, the second NAND cell string is part of the second memory block, and the fourth NAND cell string is part of a fourth memory block.
6. The NAND Flash memory of claim 5, further including a block decoder for selecting one of the first memory block, the second memory block, the third memory block and the fourth memory block for erasure, in response to the at least a portion of a block address.
7. The NAND Flash memory of claim 1, further including a charge pump for providing the erase voltage, and a selector for coupling the erase voltage to one of the first well sector and the second well sector in response to the at least a portion of a block address.

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8. The NAND Flash memory of claim 1, wherein one of the first memory block and the second memory block is configured to be selectable by a block address.

9. The NAND Flash memory of claim 1, wherein the first well sector is configured to selectively receive the erase voltage during the erase operation in response to at least a portion of a block address.

10. The NAND Flash memory of claim 1, wherein the second well sector is configured to be inhibited from receiving the erase voltage during the erase operation in response to at least a portion of a block address.

11. The NAND Flash memory of claim 1, wherein the first and second bitline segments are electrically connected to the first and second NAND cell strings, respectively, through an isolation device.

12. The NAND Flash memory of claim 11, wherein the isolation device is located between the first well sector and the second well sector.

13. The NAND Flash memory of claim 12, wherein the isolation device has a gate terminal biased to a voltage greater than a supply voltage VDD during a program operation, a read operation and the erase operation, wherein the isolation device is electrically non-conductive in the erase operation for isolating the first bitline segment from the second bitline segment when one of the first NAND cell string and the second NAND cell string is selected for erasure.

14. The NAND Flash memory of claim 12, wherein the isolation device is turned off in response to a control signal.

15. The NAND Flash memory of claim 12, wherein the isolation device is turned off in response to a well sector selection signal.

16. The NAND Flash memory of claim 12, further including a bitline segment decoder for enabling the isolation device in response to a well sector selection signal during a read operation, the bitline segment decoder disabling the isolation device in response to an erase control signal during the erase operation, optionally, wherein the bitline segment decoder includes an isolation device driver for receiving the erase control signal and the well sector selection signal, the isolation device driver providing an isolation drive signal for controlling the isolation device when the well sector selection signal is at an active logic level.

17. The NAND Flash memory of claim 16, wherein the isolation device driver includes an override circuit for driving the well sector selection signal to the active logic level in response to another well sector selection signal at the active logic level.

18. A method for erasing a selected memory block in a NAND Flash device, the method comprising:

- selecting a memory block in a first well sector, the first well sector including at least two memory blocks;
- biasing the memory block formed in the first well sector for erasure;
- biasing an unselected memory block formed in the first well sector for inhibiting erasure;
- applying an erase voltage to the first well sector;
- inhibiting application of the erase voltage to a second well sector including at least another two memory blocks;
- electrically connecting a first NAND cell string of the first well sector to a first bitline segment; and
- electrically connecting a second NAND cell string of the second well sector to a second bitline segment.

19. The method of claim 18, further including: decoupling bitline segments corresponding to the first well sector and the second well sector from each other before applying the erase voltage to the first well sector.

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20. The method of claim **18**, further including:
decoupling bitline segments corresponding to the first well
sector and the second well sector from each other with an
isolation device when a bitline voltage of the first well
sector is at least a predetermined bias voltage applied to
a gate terminal of the isolation device.

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